CORONET

Last Laugh for The Baron

John Creasey

as Anthony Morton

The Baron battles to free himself from the meshes of a complex plot to destroy him

17315-7

LAST LAUGH FOR THE BARON

'The laughter was soft and deep and warm: it sounded like the laughter of a happy man. It grew louder and louder, closer and closer . . .'

It had been a quiet, pleasant normal day at Quinns where the treasures of centuries were displayed and sold by John Mannering—who was once The Baron, master cracksman, jewel thief and latterday Robin Hood.

Josh Larraby, his confidant, once a thief, too, but reformed by Mannering's trust in him answers the phone, and a man says, calmly yet urgently, 'They're trying to kill me!' His plea for help is interrupted by a laugh, at first soft, which grows and grows till it fills Larraby with an irresistible dread.

From this simple, inexplicable incident grows a situation which calls for all Mannering's old skills, learned when he lived one jump ahead of the police, as he battles to struggle free from the meshes of a complex plot to dominate and destroy him.

Also by the same author

The Baron in France
Salute for the Baron
Danger for the Baron
Nest Egg for the Baron
The Baron and the Missing Old Masters
The Baron Goes East
The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait
Frame the Baron

and available in Coronet Books

Last Laugh For The Baron

John Creasey as
Anthony Morton

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Paperbacks Ltd., London

Copyright © 1970 by John Creasey
First published 1970 by Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Coronet edition 1973

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary and bear no relation to any living person.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which this is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Printed in Great Britain
for Coronet Books, Hodder Paperbacks Ltd.,
St. Paul's House, Warwick Lane, London, E.C.4.
by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd.,
Bungay, Suffolk

ISBN 0 340 17315 7

This book is dedicated to

The House At The End Of The Rainbow

New Mexico, U.S.A.,
New York, U.S.A.
New Hall, Salisbury, England—
1968–1969.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2022 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

https://archive.org/details/lastlaughforbaro0000mort

I

THE DESPERATE PLEA

"But they're trying to kill me," the man said. His voice was calm in spite of his words, but he spoke with an unmistakable note of urgency which the telephone did nothing to disguise. "I am not joking. Ask Mr. Mannering to speak to me, please."

"But I do assure you, sir," said Josh Larraby, "that Mr. Mannering isn't in."

"He came in only half-an-hour ago," the man stated flatly. "I saw him. And he has not left the shop since."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Josh. "He went out by the back way."

"I don't believe you!" the other said, his voice sharpening with anger.

"What I suggest, sir," replied Larraby, "is that you come and see for yourself. If you wish you may wait for him here."

There was a long pause; then the man spoke in a different, almost helpless tone.

"I can't get away."

"You mean . . . ?" Larraby began, but then broke off.

He was at the back of the long, narrow shop, called Quinns, a shop which was more like a gallery or museum, enriched as it was with antique furniture, pictures, and *objets d'art* which came from all the corners of the earth. He could see, from the desk at which he now sat, into and beyond the shop, past the discreetly lit showcases

in most of which reposed only one piece—perhaps an embossed lamp once used by a Tibetan monk; an unset stone from the crown of a King of Babylon; or a jewelled sword which had once been plunged into the heart of a faithless Queen.

Beyond these treasures was the brightness of a narrow Mayfair Street—Hart Row. Across this street, just visible, was a milliner's, one exquisitely modelled hat in the window. Sparkling and scintillating in Quinns' window, as if in competition, was a jewelled hat, a crown, remnant of an ancent oriental kingdom now part of the great mass of India.

Standing nearby, with the receiver to his ear, was the man who had said so calmly: "They're trying to kill me," and had then told Larraby: "I can't get away."

"Do you know where Mr. Mannering is?" he demanded. Now the urgency in his voice was clearly detectable.

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Do you have to lie to me?"

"I am not lying," Larraby said, quietly. "He was going to the Royal Academy, and said that he might do some shopping on the way."

"Do you know where he would shop?"

"I know where he might," conceded Larraby. "At Pendowers."

"The clothes shop?"

So the man with the deliberate voice knew this part of London, thought Larraby.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll try him there—"

"Excuse me," Larraby interrupted, "but I *am* in Mr. Mannering's confidence, sir, and if I can pass on a message, or give him your name with a telephone number

where we could reach you—"

"I don't know where I'll be," the other said. "I'll try him at Pendowers, and..."

He broke off, and Larraby heard the catch in his breath; the note of horror. Then, without warning and as if without cause, a different sound came over the wire—the sound of a man, laughing.

The laughter was soft and deep and warm; it sounded like the laughter of a happy man. And it grew louder. The caller did not speak again but Larraby could hear him breathing, harshly, stertorously. Then the laughter grew louder and louder still, closer and closer, until it was deafening in Larraby's ear. He moved the receiver away as one of the junior assistants, young Aristide Smith, was passing; Aristide paused.

The laughter stopped, as suddenly as it had begun.

There was a moment's absolute silence, followed by a click as the receiver was replaced.

For a few seconds Larraby said nothing—and in those few seconds a car pulled up outside the shop, its chauffeur, neat in dark blue suit and blue-peaked cap, springing out and opening the door for a young woman who appeared in a graceful flurry of long legs and short skirt. One of the other assistants, Lionel Spencer, moved to open the shop door as Aristide asked:

"What was that, Josh?"

"Something I didn't like at all," said Larraby, slowly. "Go into Hart Row, Smith. Don't make it evident that you are looking for anything, but try to observe any two men who might leave a shop or flat together. One may well be leaving under duress."

"At once, sir." Aristide moved swiftly. Broad shouldered and lean-flanked, his dark grey suit obviously hand-

tailored in Savile Row, he cut quite a figure.

So did the girl who entered the shop, for she was tall and elegant, her fair, straight hair falling to her shoulders, swinging like a golden curtain as she turned her head.

She said, her voice high and clear, "I would like to see Mr. Mannering, please."

Aristide slipped quickly past her.

Strange, thought Larraby, standing at the far end of the shop, that he showed so little interest in so beautiful a girl; it was almost as if he were deliberately avoiding her.

Larraby moved slowly forward, as Spencer answered.

"I'm afraid Mr. Mannering isn't in, Madam."

"When will he be back?" she asked sharply.

"I don't know, Madam. Mr. Larraby may be able to tell you."

Larraby, an elderly, frail-looking man with a gentle expression on his deep lined face, a face which nonetheless had an image of youth, was now close to the girl. She turned towards him.

Spencer, tall, thin, but a more powerful-looking youth than Aristide, watched with interest. No young man could fail to see how lovely she was, although Spencer, deeply in love with a girl he had first met at Quinns, was thinking at least as much of the aircraft he and his fiancée were to catch later that day.

"Are you Mr. Larraby?" the young woman asked Larraby.

"Yes, Madam. Mr. Mannering—"

"I must see him," she interrupted imperiously. "Do you know where he is? Where I can find him?"

After a long pause, Larraby said: "I'm sorry but I don't know. If I can help you myself—"

"No," she interrupted again. "I must see him."

"I don't know exactly when he'll be back, but I should think within the hour," Larraby said soothingly. "Would you care to wait?"

She frowned.

"Can't you possibly get in touch with Mr. Mannering now?"

"I can try, but—"

"Then please do." She spoke as if she took it for granted that she would be obeyed.

In other circumstances Larraby might have insisted with polite formality that she should state her business before he would even try, but now two people had asked for Mannering in the space of a few minutes, each with the same sense of restrained urgency; and he had a strong feeling that, if he possibly could, he must tell Mannering the girl was here.

No one else was at the back of the shop. Spencer and the third assistant, Wainwright, had moved to one side and were inspecting a glass cabinet which needed emptying and polishing; no one who worked for John Mannering wasted time. Larraby led the girl back to his desk, took a telephone directory from a shelf, and ran his fingers down the PE . . . columns in the section L to R. The next moment he was dialling Pendowers.

A woman answered almost immediately.

"Pendowers Models."

"Is Mr. John Mannering there, by any chance?" asked Larraby.

"Mr. *Who*?"

"Mannering, John Mannering."

"No," the woman said. "No one named Mannering works here."

"He is a customer," Larraby said, feeling suddenly impatient. The woman on the telephone was obviously new or she would have recognised the name Mannering. "Will you please ask if—"

The girl was watching intently, as if willing him to find Mannering at the other end of the line; but if he were there, thought Larraby, it would be sheer luck. Everything was still and silent again, neither of Quinns' assistants made any sound at all, and the girl seemed hardly to be breathing.

A strange thing happened to Larraby.

A sound seemed to echo in his ear—the sound of distant laughter, drawing nearer—never more than an echo of the laughter he had heard before, but nonetheless vivid.

It stopped, abruptly, and the telephone became alive.

"This is John Mannering," Mannering said.

Larraby was so shaken by the sound he had imagined, the trick his mind was playing him, that he didn't immediately answer. The girl took a half-step nearer and her hand moved out towards the telephone, as if she were prepared to snatch it from Larraby's.

"Is anyone there?" Mannering demanded.

Larraby collected himself.

"Yes, sir, this is Larraby. I'm glad I caught you. There is a young lady here, who—"

The girl moved again, and this time actually took the receiver from Larraby's grasp and put it to her ear.

"Mr. Mannering?" she asked.

Larraby wished he had been ready for this. He could have gone into Mannering's office, picked up the extension and listened in, able and ready to take any instructions which Mannering cared to give. But the door

would have to be unlocked and there simply wasn't time.

So, Larraby could hear only what the girl said.

"Mr. Mannering," he heard, "I want you to understand that I know what you are doing, and that you are simply wasting your time ... You know very well who I am ... I am Belle Danizon, of course ... I repeat, you are wasting your time ... Goodbye."

She put the receiver down, briskly.

Larraby, astonished at all she had said, wondering why Mannering had told him nothing of any dealings with a Belle Danizon: staring at him, almost as if he wasn't there, she was breathing hard, her lips compressed.

"Thank you for your trouble, Mr. Larraby," she said abruptly, and turned away, reaching the door only a step behind Spencer, who had hurried to open it for her. She nodded, and stepped outside; and a moment later the chauffeur was ushering her into the big, black limousine.

The three men inside Quinns watched, as if hoping to catch another glimpse of her, as the big car moved slowly away.

The next moment, it was gone, and everyone in the shop was still and silent. For a few seconds the street was empty. Then two women paused by the window of the milliner's, and an elderly Japanese walked past the window of Quinns, then turned back to look at the crown.

A car passed; a taxi; and a youth on a bright red motor-cycle.

The door of Quinns opened and the Japanese came in. He was short and broad, and had a wide face with regular features and narrow, obliquely set eyes. Larraby, turned back to his desk, while Spencer went forward to the man who had just entered.

"Good afternoon, sir."

In good but American-toned English, the Japanese said quietly:

"I am interested in the jewelled crown in the window. Will you give me some information, please?"

Spencer hesitated. Larraby appeared, knowing that only he could deal with such an inquiry, yet wishing he could have had a few minutes in which to recover his poise. He showed no lack of composure, however, as he went forward and began to explain. This was the Rapui Crown, once owned by the Prince of Rapui. They talked quietly about it, the Japanese obviously knowing a great deal about the period and the region of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

Quite suddenly, Mannering appeared at the doorway. He was tall and broad shouldered, and, in his way, as strikingly good-looking as Belle Danizon.

"...here *is* Mr. Mannering." Larraby said with relief. "I am sure he would like to discuss this with you, sir. If you will give me your name I will..."

He broke off, for Mannering's glance held the withdrawn 'not now, Josh' expression of one who had no intention of being side tracked from his purpose. He inclined his head to the Japanese, who in turn smiled mechanically and gave a stiff little bow from the waist, and walked straight past the two men towards his office.

2

JOHN MANNERING

Mannering saw Josh and the Japanese, and even before Josh spoke, guessed that he would be consulted, but he was too preoccupied and too intent at that moment to stop. The strange conversation he had had on the telephone had troubled him, and before he did anything else he wanted to put notes of it on paper.

Taking the key to his office, he opened the door and stepped inside. The room, to which he was almost blinded by familiarity, was not large, but it was beautifully proportioned. A Queen Anne desk held a place of prominence, flanked by two William and Mary chairs, their leather seats and backs polished by centuries of use. There were shelves, and built-in cupboards, and a portrait of himself dressed in all the elegance of a cavalier. Mannering spared no glance for any of these things. Moving swiftly to the desk, he pulled a notebook towards him, and began to write:

Belle Danizon...
Veiled threats...

He paused, then put his pencil aside, half-laughing at himself for having written down something which he could so easily have remembered. What on earth had possessed him to write 'veiled threats'? But all at once his smile faded. There had been something in the way the girl had talked...

There was a tap at the door, and he glanced up.

"Come in."

Josh Larraby's face appeared.

"I'm sorry to worry you, sir, but—"

"It's all right, Josh. I wanted to jot something down before I forgot it. Who is the man in the shop?"

"Mr. Hirioto Tiro." Josh handed Mannering a card on which the name was inscribed in English, and also, if Mannering guessed rightly, in Japanese. There was a New York address and, written in precise handwriting: '*At Claridges*'. "He is interested in the Rapui Crown, sir."

Mannering's head jolted up.

"Seriously?" Then he almost withdrew the word, for Larraby would not have troubled him had the interest been less than serious. "Have you told him the price?"

"Yes—forty eight thousand pounds."

"And?"

"He asked whether forty thousand would be considered."

"Did he, by Jove," said Mannering. "Did he say anything else?"

"He is flying to New York tomorrow and would like to know before he leaves London. He . . ." Larraby hesitated, and then went on: "I really feel it would be wise for you to see him, sir."

"Yes," Mannering agreed. "Yes. Josh . . ."

"Sir?"

"Did you speak to the young woman who called herself Belle Danizon?"

"I did indeed."

"Did she make any threats?"

"No *threats*, sir, but . . ." Larraby hesitated before going on: "She was very self willed, sir."

"Did you hear her talking to me?"

Larraby nodded.

"Was she—did she sound—odd in any way?"

"There was a strangeness in her manner," Larraby conceded. "And just before her visit a man..." He broke off, spreading pale hands which were mottled a faint brown and on which the veins showed blue. "But you really should see—"

"Mr. Hirioto," Mannering remembered.

"Tiro, sir. He has very limited time."

"Ah, yes. I'm being rude. Ask him in, will you?"

Mannering frowned as Larraby left, looked down at his notes, saw 'veiled threats' and wondered whether he was deceiving himself, then looked up to see the Japanese entering, a faint smile giving a hint of the enigmatic to a face of honey-brown.

"Mr. Tiro—please come in."

"You are very good to make time to see me," Tiro said in a soft voice. "Your manager has given me much instruction already." There were a few seconds spent in formalities, in sitting down, offering cigarettes—and Mannering gave the faint nod which told Larraby he wanted tea brought in. The door closed on Larraby as Mannering said:

"I understand that your time in London is limited."

"That is so, Mr. Mannering, to my deep regret. London is such a remarkable city—a city with warmth and heart, and with so many beautiful stores, such as Quinns. I have never enough time to spend in it."

"How serious are you about the Rapui Crown?" asked Mannering. He settled back, giving the man his full attention. "Are you a collector?"

"In a small way, yes. But the Crown would not be for my humble collection, Mr. Mannering. It would be for

the Eastern and Oriental Museum of New York. You have heard of it, no doubt."

"Yes, of course," Mannering said, and after a pause he went on: "But I understood that it is short of funds."

"Recently there has been a great benefactor," stated Tiro. "I am on the board of the museum and I am authorised to make inquiries and to make offers which have to be confirmed. I am offering forty thousand pounds for the Rapui Crown, and I can confirm the offer in seventy-two hours. Would you hold it for me on those terms, Mr. Mannering?"

After only a moment of hesitation, Mannering agreed.

For the first time, a hint of animation broke through Tiro's oriental passivity.

"You will hold it for three days—and if you have a larger offer meanwhile you will give the museum a chance to bid against that offer?"

"No," Mannering said. "It is the museum's for forty thousand pounds, if they formally accept within seventy-two hours."

"You are very kind, Mr. Mannering. I offer my grateful thanks."

Half-an-hour later, Tiro's offer made in writing, Mannering saw him to the door. The Japanese, so short and yet so sturdy, walked briskly towards Bond Street. Mannering went back to his office, beckoning Larraby as he entered.

"Was it a satisfactory discussion?" Larraby asked.

"I think so," Mannering said. "Josh, telephone Mr. Rennie in New York and ask if the Eastern and Oriental Museum on Central Park East and 91st Street has recently come into money and whether there is a Mr. Hirioto Tiro on the board of directors."

"At once, sir."

"Thanks. And Josh—"

"Sir."

"Had you ever seen Belle Danizon before?"

"I had not, sir."

"Neither had I."

"But—" Larraby looked astonished. "I quite got the impression that she knew you."

"She gave me that impression, too," Mannering said drily. "I wonder what she was up to." He shrugged, glanced at his notes again, and then saw Larraby's expression—one almost of bewilderment. "So you've remembered her," he remarked.

"Indeed I haven't, sir," said Larraby. "But just before she arrived there was another remarkable incident. And . . ." he glanced towards the door—"I quite expected Smith back by now." He told the story of the telephone call, and as he drew towards the end, he hesitated for so long that Mannering prompted him.

"What was so worrying, Josh?"

"It will sound quite ridiculous, sir, I'm sure," Larraby said. "There was a laugh."

"A *laugh*?"

"Yes, sir. A deep, very amused laugh which . . ." Again Larraby hesitated, but this time Mannering made no attempt to prompt him. "It—ah—drew nearer, sir. I had a feeling that someone had opened a door and entered the room, laughing, and continued to laugh until he took the receiver from the man who had called me, and hung up. He—ah—he did not appear to stop laughing at all."

"And the caller?"

"He gave one stifled—*frightened*—gasp, sir, that was all. I had the impression that he was terrified, but he

might well have been putting on an act." After another pause, Larraby went on in a puzzled voice: "Could there have been a connection between the two, I wonder? The call itself was most unsettling, and the laugh made it quite—quite macabre, sir. Miss Danizon's behaviour was unsettling, too. Could there—?" He broke off.

"Be a deliberate attempt to unsettle me," suggested Mannering.

"I did wonder, sir."

"And I'm wondering, too," said Mannering. "There isn't much we can do about it except keep our ears and eyes open. Talk to Mr. Rennie, Josh, will you?"

"At once," promised Larraby, again.

For twenty minutes, Mannering sat looking through files of inquiries for certain kinds and periods of old jewellery, and *objets d'art*. He liked to do this every day; it was a kind of therapy—and always, if he were ruffled, it had a soothing effect on him. For here were letters and telegrams from every part of the globe; from individual collectors, curators of museums, libraries and universities, all vying, in their deep desire, for the rare treasures of the ancient world. There was no end to their variety, nor to the prices offered. In one section of the file, inside an envelope, was a list of buyers who preferred to remain anonymous; even some who offered for stolen pieces, as well as some who simply preferred to gloat, like Croesus over his gold, over the rare pieces that they bought.

Today there was only one letter of immediate interest, and that was from the Royal Household of Allodia, offering twenty thousand pounds for the Crown. But this was barely half its value.

Mannering had left his door ajar and had heard Lar-

raby talking. Now he heard the ting of the receiver and the creak of Larraby's chair.

"Come in, Josh," Mannering called.

Larraby appeared.

"Mr. Tiro *is* authorised to bid, sir, and the Museum of Eastern and Oriental Art has recently received a bequest of some half-a-million dollars."

"Not pounds?"

"No, sir."

"I can't see them spending nearly a quarter of the bequest on the Rapui Crown," Mannering said. "We'll soon know. Is Aristide back yet?"

"No, he isn't, sir," Larraby answered uneasily. "I really do hope—" He broke off, apologetically. "I really shouldn't have sent him, sir."

"Nonsense," said Mannering. "It was exactly what I would have done myself. He'll turn up."

It was then nearly a quarter to five.

At half-past five, the normal closing hour, Aristide Smith still hadn't returned; nor had he telephoned. Larraby, obviously very uneasy, found some slight easement from the fact that he lived in the small flat above the shop.

"I will be here whatever time he comes back, sir, or if he telephones. Will you be at home this evening?"

"Not after seven-thirty," Mannering said. "I have the Charity Ball."

"Oh, of course, sir. I'm probably making a mountain out of a molehill. Smith is sure to be back before long."

But he was not back, nor had the telephone rung, by seven o'clock. Larraby, preparing a simple supper of scrambled eggs and mushrooms, with strawberries and

cream to follow, wondered whether to telephone Mannering.

. . . .

Mannering, quite startlingly handsome, in tails and wearing decorations won in war as well as in peace, was waiting for his wife just before half-past seven. And while he waited, he telephoned Larraby. He heard the lack of news, put down the receiver and turned to see Lorna coming out of her bedroom.

Mannering's eyes lit up and his heart contracted.

She wore dark red velvet, high at the neck but with her shoulders bare, a single diamond clip at her waist; she was as slender now as when she and Mannering had married, over twenty years before. The dress, snug at bosom, waist and knees, ballooned out about her ankles. Her black hair, only slightly flecked with grey, was high-swept, held by a single diamond studded comb.

Mannering stepped towards her.

"Darling," he said quietly, "you look magnificent."

Pleased, she put her cheek forward to be kissed. Then, almost at once, they went out of this top floor flat in an old house in Chelsea, to the small lift and down to the waiting, chauffeur driven hired car.

Mannering, proud of his wife, sat back and watched her, completely forgetting Aristide Smith.

But Larraby did not forget him.

Mannering would not have given Smith another thought that evening, but three hours after the ball had begun, when the great Albert Hall was a blaze of lights and a place of music and beauty and elegance, he came face to face with Belle Danizon.

She looked at him, haughtily, as she swept past on the arm of a middle-aged, grey-haired man. As they passed, the man chuckled. It was a deep, infectious chuckle and it made many revellers turn and stare.

3

MISSING

"What a lovely young woman," Lorna murmured.

"You mean the girl in blue?" Mannering asked.

"She isn't quite a girl," Lorna said, but there was no malice or hint of spitefulness. She was one of the most renowned portrait painters in England and when she saw a face she saw it transferred to canvas rather than as a person. "And—what a handsome man."

"Was he?" asked Mannering, in surprise.

They looked at each other and laughed—but that was the moment when Mannering wondered whether Aristide Smith was back.

Twice during the evening they saw the girl dancing, once with her middle-aged escort, and once with a younger man. Mannering, carefully disguising his interest,

"Could you do a sketch of all three?"

Lorna did not need to ask 'which three'.

"Yes," she said. "But why?"

"I'll tell you later," Mannering said.

Then an old friend of Lorna came and carried her off to the buffet, and Mannering slipped outside and telephoned Josh, although it was after one o'clock. Larraby answered the call so quickly that he must have been wide awake.

"Any news, Josh?" asked Mannering.

"Not a word of any kind," Larraby answered. "At midnight I telephoned Smith's flat, but there was no reply.

I really am getting worried, sir."

"Yes," said Mannering. "Have you tried any of the hospitals?"

"I've wondered whether I should," Larraby said. "I will, immediately."

"I'll call you again before I leave here," promised Mannering.

He turned away from the telephone booth—and then, going back into the ballroom, saw a tall man on whom tails and white tie sat well. He had a broad face with deep-set brown eyes and a lot of freckles. He smiled faintly at Mannering, who paused.

"Good evening, Mr. Mannering."

"Hallo, Inspector," Mannering said quietly. "Making sure we all behave?"

"Trying to," said Chief Inspector Gordon of the Criminal Investigation Department of the Metropolitan Police.

"How is Mr. Bristow?" inquired Mannering.

Gordon hesitated, for a split second only but long enough to make Mannering wonder.

"He's very well, sir."

"He hasn't many weeks left, has he?"

"Three, sir," said Gordon. "Then he retires."

Mannering raised his eyebrows.

"As soon as that—I hadn't realised."

Thinking of Bristow put him in a strangely nostalgic mood; in fact, Aristide's disappearance, the two strange incidents at Quinns and the trio here at the ball, all contributed to a kind of disquiet which was very much with him when Lorna came back on the arm of her escort. They were with a crowd for a few minutes, then alone on the dance floor.

"What is it, John?" Lorna asked.

"Do I look as preoccupied as all that?" he asked, startled.

"I know that faraway look in your eyes only too well," Lorna rejoined.

"We had a visit from the not-so-young woman at Quinns this afternoon and . . ." Mannering broke off, his eyes twinkling at her. "But this is no time for a tale of mystery. If I slip off without you, would you get Tommy to take you home and telephone Josh to say I'll see him in the morning?"

"Josh? At this time of night?" For the first time, Lorna looked worried. "What is it, John? And who—?"

She stopped in turn, for Mannering, staring past her towards the box where the trio had been sitting, saw them gathering up their things. He guided Lorna to the side of the floor.

"Tell you later," he said, and disappeared.

. . .

Lorna had often known Mannering behave like this throughout the years of their marriage. It never failed to worry her, never failed to make her wonder whether, one day, he would simply walk off and never come back. But she showed no sign of anxiety as Tommy Garth came up.

"Deserted?" he asked.

"For the rest of the evening," Lorna admitted, feeling rather forlorn.

"Oh, good! But how any man could be such an ass as to walk out on the most beautiful woman in London, I don't know." Tommy smiled at her admiringly "Care to dance?"

"I'd love to."

As she danced she looked everywhere about the ballroom, but saw no sign of Mannering or of the girl in blue and her two companions.

. . .

Mannering stepped out into the welcome coolness of the night. Wherever he looked, the tall street lights shone on the shining roofs of cars. Three or four policemen stood about, and a police car drove slowly by.

Mannering went across to his own car, and at once the driver materialised out of the shadows.

"Ready to leave, sir?"

"Yes. Can you pull out of the line straight away?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll get in," Mannering said, "and I want you to follow another car when I tell you."

"Right, sir!" The chauffeur was obviously both eager and intrigued.

Mannering sat back in a corner and watched the main exit. There were others, of course, the trio might have decided to go out by one of them, but—no! There they were!

They were together, the girl in the middle, her arms linked with a man on either side. They passed under a street lamp and stepped into the road, and Mannering was caught for a moment by the beauty of the girl and the attractiveness of the picture. The young man was speaking and there was a touch of gaiety in his manner. The girl looked up at him.

And then the other man laughed; a deep, echoing laugh, sounding strangely sinister. Mannering shivered,

remembering Larraby's story and how Larraby had been affected. And he remembered that Aristide Smith had been sent out to watch and to follow two men who might be those involved.

They disappeared out of his line of vision but he saw them getting into another car, twenty yards or so behind his own.

"That's the car to follow," Mannering said to his chauffeur. "Do you know any of them?"

"I know Miss Danizon and her cousin, Bruce Danizon," the man answered. "I've never seen the older man before."

. . .

Other couples and small parties were leaving the hall, so there was nothing surprising in two cars going off at the same moment and taking the same route. Mannering, still sitting back, saw the tail lights of the leading car as it went along Kensington Road to Knightsbridge, past Harrods, then towards the underpass to Piccadilly.

"If they take the underpass you take the Hyde Park Corner Road and pick them up again."

"We could lose them, sir," warned the chauffeur.

"Take the chance," Mannering insisted.

The chauffeur put on speed. The car ahead took the underpass and Mannering's sped past Hyde Park and the tall gates, then without hindrance to Piccadilly; there was hardly any traffic. Mannering watched the road, and as they drew level with the exit of the underpass, the other car appeared and he caught a glimpse of the younger man's head, turned in his direction. There was a possibility that the others had deliberately slowed down in

order to allow Mannering's car to take the lead.

"Keep going," Mannering ordered. "Let it pass when it wants to."

"Right, sir."

But the other car did not pass but turned into Brook Street, heading for the heart of Mayfair. Mannering's driver took another left turn just ahead, and they caught up with it a few moments later; soon they reached Shepherd Market, under the shadow of the Washington Hotel and the building which housed the Christian Science Reading Room. The first car made another turn, to the right.

"That's a dead end, sir," said Mannering's driver. "Sir Richard Danizon's place."

The brake lights of the first car went on, and the car pulled up. Mannering's car slowed down as it passed the end of the street, and Mannering opened the door and jumped out, going forward a few paces before recovering his balance. He doubled back.

The trio were entering a house on the right hand side of the street, a larger house than most, standing in its own grounds. The chauffeur was pulling into a gateway at one side, which appeared to lead to the garage. No one looked back. The door of the big house opened, light was shining out brightly; then it closed, and brought near darkness, broken only by the yellow beams of the old-fashioned gas lamps—this street must be at least two hundred years old, thought Mannering. The small name plate on the wall of a corner house said: *Lamb Street.*

Slowly, he went back to his car.

He could stay and watch, but there seemed little point in doing this. Everything the trio had done had been so

normal, there was not the slightest reason to think that any one of them would come out again. Mannering debated with himself as to what he should do now.

"They seem to have gone in for the night. The older man may be staying there," the chauffeur said, hopefully.

Mannering said: "How well do you know Lamb Street?"

"Very well, sir—I used to be chauffeur-valet to a gentleman who lived in this very street itself. That's how I came to know the Danizon family."

"I see. Is there a back way out?"

"No, sir. There used to be, but Sir Richard Danizon had it blocked up. It's a very unusual house for the heart of London, sir, with a wall all round it except at the front, where there are iron railings. The garage is right at the back, but everyone has to come out of the main gate or the gate where the car went."

"Will you wait and watch for an hour, in case anyone comes in or out?"

"Glad to, sir, but . . ." The man hesitated.

"Yes?" asked Mannering.

"There can't be any funny business with the Danizon family, surely. Unless—unless you're worried about their guest. Is *that* it, sir?"

"That's it," Mannering assured him. "The Danizons are above reproach, then?"

"*I* would think so, sir. A family with all that money. As a matter of fact, sir, I often have a drink with the butler I can tell you that Sir Richard and his wife are on holiday at the moment. His daughter's still there, sir—and has a lot of guests. I—er—I'm not talking out of place, am I?"

"No," Mannering assured him. "The more you can tell

me the better." As he listened, he sensed the note almost of awe in the chauffeur's voice, and was puzzled because he had not known of the Danizons until that day. The chauffeur seemed to regard the family as part of the history of London.

"...very wealthy indeed, sir—why, they say that Lady Danizon wears half-a-million pounds' worth of jewellery when she goes to special functions, and always has a special police guard—if you care to pay for it you can always arrange that. Did you know, sir?"

"I seem to have heard something to that effect," Mannering said drily. "You keep watch, then."

"How will you get back, sir?"

"I'll find a cab," Mannering said. "Call me at my home number, will you?"

"In exactly an hour, sir?"

"In exactly an hour," confirmed Mannering, and as he spoke a taxi with its FOR HIRE sign illuminated turned the corner.

After a ten minute drive along the now deserted streets, Mannering was dropped at his own front door. There was no light at the top windows, but he didn't really expect Lorna to be back yet. He went up in the lift, stepped out and took his keys from his pocket. He could not make up his mind what to do, but there was a possibility running through his mind which at once excited and appalled him. He was past the age of taking dangerous chances, yet if Aristide had followed those two men, if they had gone to Lamb Street, if they had taken him inside, there was only one way to find out.

That was to go and see for himself.

He took a long step towards the front door of his flat—and stubbed a foot against something heavy on the

floor. He tripped, pitched forward, saving himself only by pushing out a hand against the door. He became aware that he had stumbled over a man but all he could see were arms, hands, legs and feet and the back of a head.

A head of long, dark, wavy hair—like Aristide Smith's.

He straightened up, gasping for breath, and then slowly, almost fearfully, bent down and turned the man round so that he could see the face.

It was Aristide.

And his face had a pallor which made Mannering think of death.

4

MAN ASLEEP

Very carefully, Mannering turned Aristide over on his back. No limbs seemed broken and there were no blemishes on his skin. Yet he did not seem to be breathing. Mannering lifted his wrist.

Aristide's pulse was beating very slowly, but quite steadily. Tremendously relieved, Mannering opened the door of his apartment and stepped inside. A light was on in the kitchen, spreading a glow through the hall and the rooms with open doors. Lorna always liked to leave a welcoming light.

He heard a faint buzzing, almost a whirring sound, but did not let it stop him from putting on more lights and opening the spare room door wide. Then he went back for Aristide. Lifting him in his arms, he was surprised how heavy he was; there was much more muscle and sinew in this slender youth than he had suspected. He hitched him up higher and was halfway towards the spare room when a man began to laugh.

Mannering was so startled that he almost dropped his burden.

"Where the devil are you?" he called out, across the laughter.

The laughing did not cease, but grew louder, as if the man were coming nearer. But no one was in sight and there were no shadows. Mannering gritted his teeth, hoisted Aristide up again and carried him into the spare room, placing him on the bed.

The laughter went on and on.

Still clenching his teeth, Mannering made himself take off Aristide's shoes, unfasten his belt and waistband and loosen his collar. All this time the laughter continued, and all this time the young man slept.

Slept? wondered Mannering. Was Aristide in a drugged sleep, or in a coma?

Turning from the bed, he went cautiously to the hall, and paused.

The laughter came from his small study, through the partly open door. Mannering went towards it, not sure there was anyone inside; the sound might well come from a tape-recorder, but only a fool would take that for granted. He picked up a heavy candlestick, then, holding it as a club, approached the study.

"I'm coming in," he called.

The only answer was the continued laughter.

He called again: "I'm armed—and I'm coming in."

The laughter, uninterrupted, seemed to take on a note of mockery—and suddenly Mannering stopped short in his tracks.

In his concern over Aristide, he had heard the laughter and yet he hadn't heard it. But now realisation came to him like a flash of light.

The laughter he now heard was the laughter of Belle Danizon's companion at the Charity Ball.

Mannering flung the door wider open, and it cracked back against the wall. As it did so there was a sharp bang, and vapour billowed out, gas bit at Mannering's eyes and nose and mouth. He staggered back, gasping, his whole face stinging, and the deep, echoing, chuckling laughter went on and on. He groped towards the bathroom, reached the handbasin and ran cold water. It

splashed all over him as he put his cupped hands beneath the tap and then doused his face.

It could be as simple as tear gas—it smelt like it and stung like it—but it could be much more harmful. Gradually the pain eased, and soon Mannering could just make out the shape of the bathroom stool, a cabinet, the door, and even oddments in the hall beyond.

There was no need for panic; this gas was not really harmful.

He dried his face gently, eyes, nose and mouth still smarting; then, suddenly, he turned his head and listened.

The laughter had stopped.

Mannering waited motionless for a few moments, but heard nothing. Cautiously, he crept back to the study. There was a faint smell of gas, and his foot crunched on something brittle. Looking down, he saw a broken glass phial. This must have been balanced on the top of the door, thought Mannering. Pushing the glass aside with his foot, he went cautiously inside.

The room was empty.

He went over to the window and flung it open, then crossed to the kitchen and the main bedroom, opening those windows, too, hoping to clear the flat of gas before Lorna came back.

Then he went back to search the study.

There was nothing on the settle, the chiffonier or the table, nothing on the chairs, nothing on the oak panelling. But as he turned to the door, he saw a tiny tape-recorder attached to a back panel. He examined it closely, but did not touch it. There was no doubt of the viciousness of the attack. The police might well want to take fingerprints.

He left the study, and as he did so, heard the whine of the lift; this would be Lorna. He was relieved that she had not come earlier, and would have been even more so had she been a little later, for he needed time to relax, and assess the situation. Above all things, he was anxious to reassure her, and that wouldn't be easy with Aristide's unconscious body to account for.

The lift stopped, and Lorna's voice came to him, pitched to a note of determined finality. "Thank you, Tommy."

"Don't say I'm not invited for a nightcap," Tommy protested.

"It's too late, and I'm so tired—"

"Oh, nonsense, old girl! A nightcap and a—"

"Tommy, I *am* tired."

Lorna broke off. There was a curious little sound, almost a scuffle, and then silence, a silence which seemed to last for a long time. Mannering stood on the inside of the door, having no doubt about what was happening: Tommy was acting the gay Lothario. And Lorna? In his half-dazed, unsettled mood he could not really think clearly, could not be sure that her effort to dismiss Tommy hadn't been half hearted. He was a good-looking, lively man-of-the-world, and fifteen years younger than Mannering.

If they came together—

There was a gasp of sound; a footstep or two. Then:

"Let me have your key," Tommy said.

There was silence—no sound at all, until the scratching of a key came on the lock. Mannering backed swiftly away. It was accident, not design, that put him into a position behind the door where he couldn't be seen when it opened.

Slowly, it swung towards him.

"Your castle, Madam," Tommy said with elaborate solemnity. "I—*ooch!*"

There was a thud, then the sound of flurrying footsteps, and Lorna swept in, key in her hand. A great relief spread through Mannering, and he felt like laughing. With an expression half-angry, half-resigned, Lorna moved on towards the main bedroom; Mannering still hidden from her. She was halfway across the hall when she stopped, head back, sniffing.

"Hallo, darling," Mannering said. "It's only tear gas."

She spun round.

"John!"

"Yes," he said. "All in one piece, too."

"John, did you—?" She broke off as the whining sound came from the lift. "Did you hear—?"

"Poor Tommy," he said. "I feel for him."

They looked at each other for a few moments, and then, half-smiling, Mannering moved towards her. She said in a puzzled voice:

"*Tear* gas?"

"Nasty stuff but in a very small dose."

"John, what happened?"

"Aristide was returned here," Mannering told her. "And a joker with a rather nasty sense of humour seems to have been busy. But no one is hurt—at least not seriously," he added, placing an arm round Lorna's shoulder. "Let me tell you from the beginning." Sitting in the graceful Queen Anne bedroom, he told her the whole story. Then: "And Tommy provided the finest of anti-climaxes, darling. You were positively magnificent."

"John—who *is* this man?" Lorna sounded worried.

"I think you may have seen him tonight."

"You *really* think—?"

"I'm very nearly sure," said Mannering. "Like to hear that tape played back?"

After a moment's hesitation, she said: "I think I'll make some tea and listen to it later. *Is* Aristide unhurt?"

"Let's go and make sure," Mannering said.

Aristide had not moved. He looked very pale, very young, almost effeminate. Lorna eased his right arm a little and put a blanket over him, as Mannering lifted his right eyelid.

"Pupil normal," he said. "He wasn't drugged with one of the opiates. Yet it's obviously a drug."

"Shouldn't he see a doctor?" asked Lorna, uneasily.

"I think we'll wait until morning," Mannering said.

"Have you *any* idea what it's all about?"

"Absolutely no idea at all," answered Mannering. "Aristide was sent back with somebody's compliments—as a kind of warning, I presume," he repeated, more sharply. "Almost as if—"

"As if someone were trying to scare you," Lorna said. She turned round and suddenly took his face in her hands, kissing his cheek. "They don't know you!" She let him go. "Will you put the kettle on?"

"Yes," he said. "You get into bed."

Ten minutes later he was sitting by the side of the bed, tea tray on a small table, the tape recorder now on another table; he had decided not to worry about fingerprints. He had rewound the tape and as they sipped tea, the laughter came again.

Lorna listened intently.

"It is the man at the ball," she said suddenly. "I could almost swear to it."

"Almost won't help much," Mannering said ruefully.

They listened again for fully two minutes, and still the laughter continued.

"John!" exclaimed Lorna.

"Yes?"

"Whoever arranged that tape-recorder must have broken in."

"Clever girl," murmured Mannering.

"I don't like this at all," Lorna said, uneasily. She drank her tea and put the cup on the tray. "No more, darling, thanks. What—what are you going to do?"

"Try to fit the pieces together," Mannering told her.

She looked at him in a way that he knew well. A little wary, a little worried, a little frightened. He had seen this expression so often that he could guess what she was going to say, but tonight it was a long time before she said it. He studied her, closely, and with the understanding and warmth of a long life together, threatened only once or twice by conflicts which had brought them almost to breaking. He felt a love for her which he knew would never again be shaken, and was confident that her love for him was almost as great.

But all their shared years had been darkened, at times, by the shadow which touched them now.

And she looked—beautiful. Beautiful with a touch of the sombre, a kind of sullenness about her full, well-shaped lips. Her grey eyes, heavy with tiredness now, regarded him gravely.

"John," she said at last, "please don't go out again tonight. And please don't try to fit the pieces together by yourself."

He put out his hands and touched hers, gently.

"I won't go out until I've slept on the situation," he

promised. "And there's the whole weekend to think about it."

Going to see Aristide again, he found his colour was better and his pulse beating more strongly.

Half-an-hour later Mannering went to sleep, thankful that Lorna was already sleeping, a little uneasy about Aristide, wondering whether he should have called a doctor.

. . .

Aristide, awake, unshaven, anxious to a point of apprehension, stood over him in the quiet room, whispering.

"Sir—

"Mr. Mannering—

"I'm sorry to wake you, sir, but—"

Mannering became aware of a great relief, and then acutely aware of Lorna in the next bed, who must not be wakened. He pointed to the bedroom door, and as the young man turned away, flung the blankets back, picked up his dressing-gown and followed Aristide out of the room. He pulled the door to but did not latch it. Aristide, very much on edge, was now hovering in the kitchen doorway.

"I—er—put a kettle on, sir. I felt like a cup and I—er—I wondered if *you* would like a cup of tea."

"The only thing I'd like more is to know what happened to you," said Mannering. "Make the tea. I'll be back with you in two minutes." He went into the bathroom, sluiced his face with cold water, and returned. It was broad daylight, and he saw from the kitchen clock that it was half-past eight. So he had had four hours sleep.

Aristide had a tea tray ready and the kettle was boiling. Milk, sugar, cups and saucers were on a tray.

"Well," Mannering said, dropping into a chair. "What *did* happen to you, Aristide?"

5

THE LOST MEMORY

Aristide Smith stood with a cup and saucer in his hand and stared at Mannering as if he were terrified. He had fine blue green eyes and delicately marked features and the perfection of his skin and complexion showed even through the thick, dark stubble. He had long, up curling eyelashes and they ringed his eyes, throwing them into vivid relief.

"I—I don't know," he said.

Mannering, sipping his tea, almost dropped the cup.

"What?"

"Well, I don't," muttered Aristide. "I really don't."

Mannering drank more deeply, and put the cup aside.

"Well at least you can make a good cup of tea," he remarked. "Sit down, and let's talk about this."

All there was left to sit on was a high kitchen stool. Aristide hitched himself up on it.

"How the devil did I get here?" he burst out.

"Don't you even know that?"

"I wish to God I did," the young man muttered. "I couldn't believe it when I woke up—it doesn't make any sense at all. Don't *you* know how I got here? I mean, didn't *you* bring me here?"

"You were here when I came back last night."

"Does—does *Mrs.* Mannering know I'm here?"

"Yes," Mannering answered gently. "She was as puzzled and worried as I."

"It—it simply doesn't make sense," Aristide said helplessly. "I was in the shop one minute and the next, obviously early morning, I wake up here." Now, his eyes and the groove between them gathered in a frown, and his voice became clipped, his manner almost suspicious. "*Some*one must be playing a joke on me." His look was challenging, near accusing, as if he wanted to add: "Was it you?"

"No," said Mannering. "This is no joke."

"Someone must be trying to make a fool of me! No man would behave like this unless—" He broke off, and then exploded: "Unless he were crazy or took drugs, or—" Again he stopped and slid off the bar stool, stood in front of Mannering, glaring. "You *must* know something about it—sir," he added, as an afterthought.

"I must tell you exactly what I do know," said Mannering. "But first—why did you come and wake me?"

Aristide backed a pace.

"I—I'm sorry about that, sir, but—but I felt as if I were going mad. I couldn't just walk out and leave a note and I'd been awake for nearly two hours. The suspense was awful. I just had to know something."

"Yes, I can see that," Mannering said. "Let's go into my room, we can be more comfortable there." He led the way, dropped into a big winged armchair and waved Aristide to a smaller one. Then he told the story just as he had to Lorna last night, omitting only the laughter which had so startled him when he had come into the flat.

Aristide watched him with rapt attention, and was quiet for a few moments when the story was told. Then he rasped his finger over his stubble.

"It doesn't seem possible," he said slowly. "All *that* happened?"

"Yes."

"But—but I simply don't remember a thing!"

"Don't you remember Larraby telling you to go out into the street?"

"No, sir."

"Or following two men?"

"Mr. Mannering," said Aristide, leaning forward with both hands outstretched, as if in supplication, "I remember Josh talking on the telephone; I even remember a sound of laughter coming from the telephone and I think Josh looked scared. Then he came towards me, and—and I don't remember what he said. I can't even be sure he spoke to me. After that moment everything is a blank until the moment when I woke this morning." Now, the note of accusation had vanished from his eyes and in its place was apprehension. "You—you do believe me, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Mannering assured him. "I certainly believe you."

"What the devil could have happened?"

"You could have been drugged," said Mannering, "but I doubt if that's the answer. The fact that your memory stops at a positive time like that suggests that you were hypnotised, Aristide, and under the hypnosis you were told what to forget. I've come across that form of induced amnesia before but there aren't many hypnotists capable of inducing it."

"I simply can't believe it," Aristide said, almost sulkily.

"I think you're going to have to believe it," retorted Mannering.

"But my memory's bound to come back!"

"Let's give it a try," said Mannering. "Go back to your flat, telephone Josh, tell him you'll be in late this morn-

ing, and get to the shop as soon as you can. I'll be there by—" he glanced at the kitchen clock—"eleven o'clock at the latest."

"Right-ho," said Aristide. "I—but great Scott!"

"What is it now?"

"Where's my motor-cycle?"

"Where did you leave it?"

"In the car park near Quinns."

"Then that's where it will be," answered Mannering, as the young man dipped his right hand into his trouser pocket and took out a bunch of keys. "Do you feel all right?"

"I feel fine," said Aristide, looking utterly bewildered. "But I just can't believe—" For the first time that morning he gave a quick flash of a smile which made him look very young. "I'll do just what you say, I'm *sure* to remember something! See you later, sir."

He hurried out of the flat, and a few minutes later Mannering heard the whine of the lift as it carried him down to the ground floor.

When Mannering reached Quinns just after eleven o'clock, after waking Lorna, taking her tea, and breakfasting on toast and coffee, he found Larraby, Spencer and Aristide at the back of the long, narrow shop, obviously in a huddle, obviously perturbed. All three looked round as if caught out in some guilty act as Mannering walked towards them.

Larraby looked deeply troubled, Lionel Spencer baffled, and Aristide Smith frightened.

"I still don't remember a thing," whispered Aristide. "Not a thing."

They were still standing there when the telephone bell rang, and even Mannering was so affected by the youth's

expression that he let it ring. Suddenly Larraby turned to answer it, snatching up the receiver almost with exasperation.

"Who is that?" he asked, and all three watched him, while Mannering half expected a laugh to come firm and deep out of the telephone. Instead, Larraby spoke in a different tone. "Yes, sir—yes, he is here, I am sure he will speak to you. It is Superintendent Bristow of Scotland Yard, sir," he said to Mannering, and held the telephone out.

. . .

Between John Mannering and William Bristow there was a long standing friendship, born out of early enmity and bitter antagonism. Very few people knew the truth, or even guessed it, but when Lorna had looked so strangely at Mannering the previous night, Bristow might almost have been peering over her shoulder. For when they had first met, Mannering had been a jewel thief extraordinary, a mystery-cracksman whose identity was unknown, and who had been dubbed 'The Baron' because, as a modern Robin Hood, he robbed the rich to help the poor.

Bristow had finally discovered his identity, but had never been able to prove it.

As the years passed and after Mannering had married Lorna—then Lorna Fauntley, daughter of a man whom the Baron had robbed—Mannering had abandoned his role as cracksman and had become the owner of Quinns, as highly respected as any dealer in the world. But his love of adventure was still strong, and from time to time, when clients had come to him for guidance and help, he had taken grave risks in helping them.

These things, Bristow had also known.

Further, the time had come when Mannering had been consulted both by the police and by insurance companies, in the task of finding stolen jewellery and works of art, so that there had been for Bristow the great irony of having to consult a man whom he knew to be a one-time criminal.

They had learned first to respect, then to like, finally to admire each other. And the past was the past between them, although when both were involved in the same case the Baron was a shade more wary than usual, and Bristow a shade more suspicious. For how could Bristow be sure that Mannering, the once daring and resourceful expert in jewel theft; would not one day revert to his old occupation? *Does* a leopard ever really change its spots? He wondered.

And where Bristow was concerned—and for that matter all the Yard—there was another factor, once much more important than it was now. Larraby had served a long prison sentence for the theft of precious stones, a theft due not to lust for money but to love of the beauty of rare gems. At one time they had almost mesmerised him, so deep had been his longing to possess, to hold with love and reverence, these treasures of such beauty.

But this was many years ago, and Larraby had long since held a position of trust with Mannering at Quinns. No one really suspected him, but—*does* a leopard ever change its spots? wondered Bristow again.

And Mannering knew that he wondered.

And now, at a time when Mannering was so confused, Bristow, only a few weeks off retirement, was on the telephone.

What could he want? mused Mannering. Was he well-

disposed or in a mood of suspicion?

He took the telephone receiver Larraby was holding towards him.

"Hallo, Bill," he said warmly. "Nice to hear from you. What's brought you into the office on a Saturday morning?"

"I'm not at the office, John." Bristow's voice was troubled. "I'm at home. I've run into a problem I think you could help me with. Can you spare an hour or two so that we can talk in private?"

Everything comes at once, Mannering thought resignedly. It was an odd coincidence that Bristow should seek Mannering's help at this particular time. Or *was* it coincidence?

"How about lunching with us, Bill?" he suggested. "I'll be free by one o'clock. I've nothing to do this afternoon, unless it's to go to Lords for a few hours."

"I—ah—I don't want to discuss this in front of *anyone*, John—not even Lorna. It's very good of you, but could you come here? My wife's with my son and his family for the weekend, so I'm a grass widower."

"One thirty?" suggested Mannering, allowing himself half-an-hour to drive from the West End to Putney, where Bristow had an apartment in a mammoth block overlooking Putney Heath.

"I'll look forward to seeing you," Bristow said.

Mannering put down the receiver with slow deliberation. Larraby and Aristide had moved out of earshot, but the moment they saw he had finished his conversation they turned towards him. He saw that they were too absorbed in Aristide's problem to take more than a cursory interest in his talk with Bristow, although there was a gleam of inquiry in Larraby's expression.

"How is your memory progressing?" Mannering asked, lightly.

"I simply don't remember a thing," stated Aristide flatly. "Twelve hours have gone out of my life—oh, it isn't possible. I—"

He broke off and spun round. So did the others. For suddenly from the window of Quinns there came a laugh, soft and pleasant at first, but growing louder; good-humoured, and yet oddly menacing. Mannering moved with startling speed towards the door, but no one was in sight.

He felt a quivering up and down his spine; and involuntarily, shivered. He knew what it was. There were small microphones outside Quinns, installed several years previously after the shop had been burgled by two men who, it was realised too late, had been talking about their tactics just outside. Since then at least four attempted robberies had been anticipated; twice, the police had arrived before the intending thieves had even entered the shop.

Mannering stepped further into Hart Row.

At the side of the shop, stuck between the old wooden surround and the toughened plate glass window was a tiny tape-recorder, identical with the one that had been placed in his study. He stood watching it as the others from the shop joined him. Two or three people had now turned into Hart Row, and there was a stream of traffic at the end of the street.

Mannering wondered if the others realised the significance of this: whoever had placed that recorder there had obviously known that the recording of the laugh would be picked up and broadcast throughout the shop. But

only the staff and a few police officers knew about the microphones.

He must have it examined for prints, quickly. There was no need to explain anything, he need only ask the police to check.

Suddenly, Aristide Smith thrust past him, grasping the recorder and wrenching it from the wood. Before Mannering could do anything to stop him, he had ruined any chance of getting fingerprints.

In anger? wondered Mannering.

Or with intent?

Had he told Mannering the truth, or did he know much more than he pretended? Was his loss of memory genuine or had it been assumed? Just what was going on? Mannering asked himself grimly.

6

LATE ARRIVAL

"Aristide—" Mannering spoke with a mildness he was far from feeling—"take that into the cloakroom and see whether you can detect any prints—other than yours, of course. Josh, you check with him. If you think there are any identifiable prints, ask the local police to come along."

"From Savile Row, sir?"

"Yes."

"I didn't dream—" Aristide began.

"Never mind about it now," Mannering interrupted briskly. "Let's get back into the shop."

A dozen people had gathered near, and two or three others stood on the doorsteps of those shops in Hart Row which opened for a few hours on Saturday mornings. Mannering paused, looking into the window of Quinns as if finding a new and absorbing interest in the Rapui Crown, but actually trying to see whether anyone was taking particular notice. No one was.

Following the others back into the shop, he walked straight through to his office, and dropped heavily into a chair. It wasn't surprising that he was tired, he thought, these days he needed more sleep than in the past, but it was not physical tiredness which troubled him now, it was the situation. He had not really sat back and pondered; it was long past time he did.

It seemed unlikely that Aristide was involved. Manner-

ing knew his family, his academic background, and all about him that mattered to Quinns. He was a rich young man who had joined the staff because of his interest in *objets d'art* and antiques. Nevertheless, thought Mannering, it was strange that he should have seized the recorder; it was almost as if he *meant* to destroy any fingerprints on it. It would be as well to check his recent activities —particularly any recently formed friendships.

Someone, thought Mannering grimly, presumably the laughing man, was trying to unnerve him, and did not greatly mind what steps he took to do it. He wasn't very worried about the man succeeding, but Bristow was obviously deeply troubled. If there could be any connection—

Whatever Bristow's problem he, Mannering, had to find out more about Belle Danizon, about her cousin Bruce, and about the good looking, middle-aged man. There was the puzzling factor that he himself hadn't known about the Danizons' wealth and position in Mayfair society, but he should be able to check on that very easily. Making one or two notes on the slip of paper which he had used the previous night, Mannering ran through a card index file until he reached the name Montgomery Brie, who had an address in Albany, W.1. He dialled the number and a man answered at once, his voice high-pitched and querulous.

"Yes, who is that?"

"John Mannering."

"Who? Oh! Mannering. Haven't seen or heard of you for a long time, Mannering. Imagined you were gadding about in foreign parts. Can't understand you chaps who don't stay in England. Still the finest country in the world, don't let me hear you say a word against it."

"I didn't intend to," Mannering assured him. "I simply

need a little help, if you—"

"Help? What help can a decrepit old man like me give an active young one like you?"

"Knowledge and advice," Mannering answered.

"Humph. Glad some of you seem to appreciate the fact that the older generation does know something. Glad to help if I can."

"You're very good," Mannering murmured. "What do you know of a family named Danizon? D-A-N-I-Z-O-N."

There was hardly a split second's pause before Brie asked:

"The Lamb Street Danizons?"

"Yes."

"Let me think a minute." Mannering could almost see Brie's old face drawn up like a wrinkled walnut; eyes nearly buried beneath bushy eyebrows and heavy, fleshy eyelids. "Danizon . . . Danizon . . . good enough breeding. Direct line of descent from the Yorkshire Danizons—very patriotic, very shrewd, collectors, I believe, of precious stones and *objets d'art*—"

"Ah!" exclaimed Mannering.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm sorry," Mannering said, lying glibly. "I sneezed."

"My dear fellow. A tot of brandy and a hot water bottle, that's what you want, and don't tell me you can't do such a thing in the middle of the day. An incipient cold neglected is all too soon a bout of influenza. Very famous collection, I understand, Chinese jade and ivory, paintings, porcelain, and a certain amount of Cambodian and Laotian medieval jewellery—but you should know this."

"A bad lapse of memory," Mannering apologised. "But you're bringing it all back. What else can you tell me?"

"Well—" Brie paused—"Sir Richard and Lady Danizon are all right, but I've heard that the daughter's a bit wild—goes in for yoga and all that nonsense. Runs around with a pretty queer crowd, so I believe, but that's all I can tell you. Let me know if I can help in any other way. Goodbye."

Montgomery Brie rang off before Mannering could say another word, and in a way Mannering was not at all sorry. He replaced his own receiver very slowly, and as he did so, there was a faint buzz. That would be Josh; he had probably been trying to get through for some time. Mannering picked up the receiver once again.

"Yes?"

"I have been over the tape-recorder with Smith very carefully," Larraby reported. "I think whoever installed it must have worn gloves; only Smith's prints were on the instrument."

"Thanks, Josh," Mannering said, wondering why Larraby always called Aristide by his surname. It was not so of others once they had been fully accepted into the family of Quinns. "Is there anything else happening?"

"One or two inquiries, sir, that is all."

"I think we'll close at twelve," Mannering said. "I'm going into the street in a moment to find out if anyone who was outside half an hour ago is still there. When I come back I'll leave almost at once. See whether I'm followed, will you?"

"I will brief Lionel Spencer," promised Larraby.

"Do that," said Mannering.

It seemed as if Larraby was troubled about Aristide, too, he thought. Worriedly, he went over all he recalled of the youngster's recent activities. They had been satisfactory enough so far as his work was concerned.

He went out into the shop.

Aristide was on the far side, examining a wall-plaque type ikon through a lens and did not seem to notice Mannering go out. Mannering walked to the corner of New Bond Street and then into a gramophone record store near the Aeolean Hall. He bought a new recording of Bach's *Double Violin Concerto* for Lorna, and went back to Quinns. In all he had been away for fifteen minutes or so, and had seen no one he recognised. In fact only for a moment had he paused, opposite an Indian carpet showroom which was fairly new in Hart Row, because a man coming out had seemed familiar; but, on taking a second look, he decided he had not seen him before.

When he went into Quinns, Aristide hurried towards him, a picture of desolation and dismay.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am about the recorder, sir, or about everything, if it comes to that. I would do anything to help, Mr. Mannering—anything at all."

"Where will you be over the weekend?" asked Mannering.

"At my flat. If you need me for anything, sir, I'll come over like a shot. I shall only be messing about with my record-player or doing a bit of developing or some reading."

"If you can help in any way at all, I'll call on you," Mannering promised.

He was still not sure what he felt about Aristide, but at least, if the boy was genuine, he had reassured him. Leaving the locking up to Larraby, he left just after twelve o'clock, collecting his car—a pale grey Allard—from a nearby car park. He did not notice anyone taking any special notice of him, and soon after he reached home there was a call from Larraby.

"You were not followed, sir."

"Good," said Mannering. "Thanks."

"I'll be here all the weekend, sir, if you should need anything."

"Josh?"

"Sir?"

"Check Aristide's recent movements and friendships, will you?"

"I will indeed," said Larraby in a tone of such evident relief that Mannering no longer doubted that he too was worried about the boy.

Lorna was out—he remembered she had been going to a semi-formal garden party to fête an artist from Italy. In normal circumstances he would have gone with her, but now he was only glad that Lorna wasn't there. It was nearly twenty to one and he had good time to get to Bristow's flat.

His feeling of disquiet was growing more marked.

Suddenly he went to a wardrobe in his and Lorna's room, unlocked a drawer at its base, and then unlocked a secret compartment which would have fooled most people, it was so well concealed. Inside was a small automatic pistol, a knife and a few other oddments; tools which would have made the eyes of any policeman widen in astonishment. There, also, was a small but very professional make-up box.

He took the box out, left the other things in the drawer and secured it again. Then he went into the kitchen, opened a cupboard, and took out what seemed to be a very simple all purpose tool kit for general household maintenance: it fitted flat and snug in his pocket.

Had Lorna come in then and seen him and asked him why he was taking these precautions, he could not have

explained. It was as if the laughing man and the strange incidents of the past twenty-four hours had filled him with both nostalgia and alarm.

Going to his study to check the number of Bristow's flat, he found, on his desk, a pencil sketch of Belle Danizon, Bruce, and the middle-aged man. So Lorna hadn't forgotten after all, he thought gratefully.

The likenesses were astonishingly good.

Folding the paper carefully to avoid creasing the faces, he slipped it into his pocket book, turned up Bristow's address, and went out. Once in the Allard, he drove swiftly on his way; no one appeared to follow, and yet he felt all the time as if unseen eyes were watching him.

Oh—nonsense!

But he knew that the feeling could not be dismissed so lightly. He had often been 'warned' in this way of approaching danger, and these warnings had always proved justified. Now, the warning had never been stronger, and was so compulsive that as he drove up Putney High Street towards the Heath, he knew that he could not go into Bristow's apartment without taking certain precautions.

There were taxis outside the Southern Region Station, near the junction, and he pulled into a parking place, left his car locked and took a taxi.

"I just want to drive round High Tower Flats," Mannering said.

"Which building, sir?"

"Number three, I think or it could be five."

The taxi driver would presumably think that his fare had lost his memory.

Three minutes later Mannering's taxi turned into the driveway of the oldish, yellow brick building, and as the

taxi slowed down by the main entrance he saw a young man sitting at the wheel of a white M.G. He was reading a newspaper, and might have been any young man waiting for a girl to come out to join him.

Except that it wasn't any young man; it was Bruce Danizon, the man who had been at the Charity Ball last night. Belle Danizon's cousin.

. . .

"Bill," said Mannering into a telephone outside Putney Station, "I'm going to be a little late. I don't want to be recognised when I come into the building. Don't be surprised if I appear a little different, will you?"

"So you've seen the man who is watching me," Bristow said gruffly.

He seemed to take it almost for granted ... as if he were unaware of the irony of the fact that he, the Yard's senior detective, was being watched. He did not even sound angry.

. . .

Mannering went into the men's cloakroom at Putney Station, went into a W.C. booth and opened the make up case, placed it on the cistern and hung a small shaving mirror on the door. The light was poor but it would serve his purpose. He used make-up with the skill of long practice, etching in deep lines at the corners of his mouth, dark patches beneath his eyes, and lines at his nose so that his nostrils looked much broader than they were. He put powder on his hair, making himself look grey and older. Then he stuck on a wispy grey moustache.

As he peered at himself in the mirror he felt certain that no one would recognise him at a distance, although close scrutiny might give his identity away.

He hitched his trousers up very high, changing the way they hung, and slipped two pads under the shoulders of his coat. Five minutes later, he was waiting at a bus stop with two or three other people. A bus trundled up. He sat close to the exit and got off, with apparent physical effort, when he was opposite Bristow's block. Then he walked in, splay footed, shoulders rounded.

Bruce Danizon was still in the car, but hardly spared him a second look. To make doubly sure that he had no suspicions of him, Mannering paused in the lobby, watching him through the half-open door. Danizon went on reading. Satisfied he had been unrecognised, Mannering took the lift to the seventh and top floor.

7

BRISTOW AND MANNERING

There were footsteps inside the flat almost as soon as the doorbell rang, and Bristow opened the door. Just for a moment he hesitated, as if not sure of the identity of his caller, but then he smiled wryly, and stood back.

"Still the great disguise expert," he remarked. "I've been thinking a lot about you today, John." He closed the door, and shook hands, and it was almost a surprise that his handclasp was as firm and cool as ever, because Mannering was so shocked at Bristow's appearance. It was only a few months since they had met, and yet the detective looked ten years older.

"Don't tell me," he said. "I know how I look."

"You look as if it's time you retired," Mannering made himself say, but the attempted joke fell flat.

He followed Bristow into a large room with windows overlooking another block of flats, but with a side view of Putney Heath, the wide expanse of grass and trees stretching far out of sight. On a table between two armchairs were sandwiches, biscuits, Stilton and Cheddar cheese, a bottle of red wine, and beer.

"Sit down," Bristow said. "Short drink first?"

"No, thanks—beer will be fine."

"Start in when you want to," invited Bristow. He leaned back in his chair and studied Mannering intently, then laughed and for a moment looked much more his old self. "I hand it to you, John. If I hadn't expected

you I would have doubted whether it *was* you. If it weren't for your eyes I'd doubt it this minute. What a lucky man you are!"

"Lucky?" echoed Mannering.

"You've had the luck of the devil," declared Bristow. "Any other man with your—your past would have spent half his life in prison. No, no," he added hastily, "I'm not being sour. Envious, perhaps, even—" the smile flashed again—"even a little admiring! But you *have* been lucky."

"Yes," said Mannering, mildly. "Especially in the policeman who set out to get the Baron."

"It's no use speculating," Bristow said, leaning forward towards a bottle of beer. "But I wonder what would have happened if I had caught you and you'd been found guilty."

"I'd be a forgotten episode," Mannering said. "Probably a kind of genteel Josh Larraby."

"Genteel—*you!*" Bristow laughed with great freedom, as if looking back had already done him good. "And a forgotten episode? I doubt it very much. You'd have found a way of hitting the headlines somehow, you'd probably have escaped!" He poured out beer as Mannering dug into the Stilton and spread it on a cracker. "As I said, it's no use speculating on what might have happened if something else hadn't, but it's hard not to, sometimes. How is Lorna?"

"Well—and as lovely as ever," Mannering said with a sudden burst of feeling.

Bristow nodded agreement.

"She's a remarkable woman, John. I don't think I know another who would have married you knowing you were a jewel thief, I really don't. How are her parents?"

"Both are very old and not too well," Mannering said. "She spends a lot of time with them."

"I can imagine. I often thought that old Fauntley knew—" Bristow broke off, frowning. "What on earth's got into me, I'm talking as if I'm in my dotage and can only look back." He cut a wedge of Cheddar cheese and buttered a biscuit liberally.

"Not looking forward to retirement?" asked Mannering.

After a long pause, Bristow answered: "I was, until a few weeks ago—five weeks and a day, to be precise. I was looking forward to it very much. Mary and I had decided not to move into the country. We like it here and I don't think I could leave London for very long. But now—" He broke off once again, pushed his chair back, and leapt to his feet. Striding across the room, he paused by the window, and stood staring downwards. "Now I don't even know that I shall be able to retire," he went on gruffly, without turning his head. "I half-expect to be thrown out on my neck, with loss of pension and all privileges."

"What on earth are you talking about, Bill?" Mannering leaned back in his chair, looking utterly dumbfounded. "That's absolute nonsense!"

Bristow swung round to face him.

"But it isn't nonsense."

Mannering was silent for a few moments. Then.

"What's gone wrong?" he asked quietly.

"There is a very real chance that I shall be accused of conniving at jewel robberies," Bristow said flatly.

"Bill, that *is* nonsense."

"Yes," agreed Bristow, "and then in a way, it isn't. I've known for a long time, we all have, that some jewel and

fine art collectors buy stolen treasures and keep them hidden away. I could name a dozen of them here in London."

"There's a whale of a difference between knowing it and proving it. You knew that I—" Mannering broke off in turn, and tried to eat, but suddenly he wasn't so hungry. "How can I help?" he asked.

Bristow said evenly: "*Will* you help?"

"In every way I can."

"Even if—'

"Even if it means that I might run into trouble?"

"Yes, that's what I mean," said Bristow, gruffly. "Yes. I knew—I knew you would. I'm not sure what I can ask you to do, I'm not sure of anything except that I can't keep the damned business to myself any longer." He came across and sat down again, drank some beer and went on: "Five weeks ago yesterday, John, Sir Stanton Frewin's house was burgled. Nearly a quarter of a million pounds' worth of jewellery was stolen. Frewin called the Yard in and asked that it be kept secret. We agreed—and I was assigned to the case. It seemed to the Commissioner, the A.C. and to me that this was a nice little job to round off my forty years at the Yard."

Mannering pretended not to notice the bitterness in Bristow's voice.

"Why wasn't it?" he asked.

"It looked as if Frewin's son Eric had been involved," said Bristow. "Certainly Frewin thought he had been, that was why he wanted it kept secret. But I haven't been able to prove that Eric had anything to do with it. Instead of it being an easy investigation, it was very tough. And the next week—also a Friday—Carlos Rocco's collection was stolen."

Mannering caught his breath, for Rocco was one of the best known judges of emeralds in the world and his collection, although small, was both valuable and famous.

"And why did *he* want it kept quiet?" asked Mannering. Obviously Rocco, like Frewin, had asked for a confidential inquiry, or the newspapers would have had the story.

"He feared that his daughter Maria was involved," stated Bristow.

Mannering had a vision of a small, strikingly attractive girl with raven black hair.

"And wasn't she?"

"If she was I haven't been able to establish it," answered Bristow. Before Mannering could comment he went on: "There have been three others, and all hush-hush. Lady Gay Bennett, Lord Devon and Charles Clawson. In each case it looked as if the thief had inside help, in each case a member of the family was suspected, in each—each of *five* investigations, John—I have been able to prove nothing."

"And who is accusing you of conniving?" asked Mannering.

Bristow looked at him very straightly.

"The Commissioner himself. He hasn't yet put it into words but by hints and innuendo, mostly passed on by the A.C., who is obviously suspicious, too, he makes it clear that he thinks one or more of the victims has paid me to keep what I've found out to myself."

"The bloody fool!" exploded Mannering.

"It's not quite as crazy as it looks," Bristow said with obvious effort. "Both the Commissioner and the A.C. are fairly new. I'm one of the old brigade to them. And while I won't do badly in retirement I don't exactly join the

ranks of the millionaires. One golden handshake, as it were, could almost double my income after I've retired, and all five victims are very rich indeed. Oh, I could prove to have feet of clay, don't make any bones about that."

"What have you done?" asked Mannering, stonily.

"Beyond the usual investigation—nothing. Obviously if any of the five were asked, he or she would deny having paid me anything, so a blunt denial on their parts wouldn't help. It's the very devil of a situation."

"Yes. What of the man outside?" asked Mannering.

"I don't know him. I do know that I'm being watched, and I think it's by one of the C.I.D., a divisional man I wouldn't recognise."

"I can tell you one thing," Mannering said. "The youth in the M.G. is not a policeman." As Bristow's eyes lit up, he went on: "Don't ask me who he is yet, Bill. I'd like to check one or two things first."

In fact, he found himself suddenly and vividly aware of a great and grave dilemma.

If he told Bristow about the Danizons, it would surely do more harm than good. Bristow, knowing he was already involved, would be worried by the possibility that his superiors at the Yard would find that out. On the other hand if he did not tell Bristow now and Bristow himself discovered the truth later, it would be like a betrayal of trust. So he compromised with that 'don't ask me who he is yet, Bill'.

"All right," Bristow conceded. "But John—don't keep too much to yourself in this. If my superiors find out I've consulted you—"

"Bill," interrupted Mannering, "they mustn't know, at least until you want them to. But it's a very interesting

situation, and there isn't any reason why I shouldn't get in touch with all of the five victims."

"What reason could you give?" demanded Bristow. "You mustn't start any of your daredevil -"

"Daredevil nothing. I simply let them know that I've heard rumours that some of their collection is on the market," Mannering said. "They could never prove that wrong, and if all these jewels have been stolen they probably will be on the market sooner or later. Is there any good reason why I shouldn't approach them?"

After a long pause, Bristow said: "No. No—it might even be a good idea. Will you, John?"

"I certainly will. And I'll start this weekend." Mannering suddenly recovered his appetite. He opened another bottle of beer and dipped into the cheese again. As he munched he thought rapidly, and was more than ever sure that he should not yet tell Bristow what had been happening to him. But would Bristow know anything about the people involved?

"Just one other thing," he said casually, reaching for his pocket book. "Do you know any of these characters?"

He showed Bristow Lorna's sketches.

"I know the girl—Sir Richard Danizon's daughter," said Bristow. "But the others are strangers. What's your interest in them, John?"

"They're all three involved in a little mystery which will probably come to nothing," Mannering dissembled.

It was nearly four when he left Bristow's flat. Bristow looked much happier, but Mannering doubted whether he would have looked so happy had he known what was in his, Mannering's, mind. Reaching the main entrance, he saw Bruce Danizon still at the wheel of the M.G. He went out, saw the youth glance at him and then look

away. Instead of turning towards the road and the bus stop, Mannering shambled, splay-footed, towards the car. The hood was down, no one could have been more vulnerable than Belle Danizon's cousin.

"Excuse me," Mannering said, in a lisping voice, "your off-door—"

Danizon turned his head quickly, exposing the back of his neck, and at that moment Mannering's right hand descended in a powerful chop.

"Like me to drive?" he asked, as if to himself, and he pushed Danizon away from the wheel and took his place. Bruce lolled back in the passenger seat, quite unconscious; he would be like that for quite a while yet.

Mannering turned the key in the ignition and started the car; anyone watching would surely have assumed that the patient young man had been waiting for him. No one took the slightest notice as Mannering turned left, down the hill, and drove towards Putney Bridge and Fulham. He knew exactly where he wanted to be when Bruce Danizon came round.

8

THE FIRST REPRISAL

Mannering turned into a narrow back street off the New King's Road, Fulham, to a row of garages, each numbered, each secured with a padlock. As he turned the car Bruce Danizon stirred. Mannering, expecting him to come round any minute, was very wary. He pulled up in front of a garage marked 5 in black paint, and put his hand to his pocket for his keys. At the same moment he opened the door of the M.G.

Danizon swung bodily round and struck out at him.

Mannering, prepared for the attack, dropped his left hand to the other's wrist and twisted savagely. Bruce gasped in pain and collapsed.

"Try that again and I'll break your neck," Mannering growled.

No one was about, for the garages faced the blank wall of a factory building. He knew there was a risk that one of the other tenants would come round but there was no time to take precautions. He grabbed Danizon's shoulder and pulled him bodily from the car, then thrust his right arm up behind him in a hammer lock.

"Hold the padlock steady," he grated, selecting a key.

"You—you're breaking my arm!"

"That's better than your neck. Hold it steady."

Bruce obeyed as well as he could but he was shivering from reaction and no doubt from fear. Mannering pushed

the key into the padlock, and when the hoop sprung, pulled the padlock away. Danizon made a single attempt to free himself, but stopped almost as soon as he started.

Mannering pulled open the heavy garage door, released the other and pushed him inside. Only daylight from the open door shone in, and showed a big old car inside. Danizon bumped against it.

"Get in," ordered Mannering.

"You—you'll regret this."

"Get *in*." Mannering pulled open one of the rear doors.

"Who—who the hell are you?" gasped Bruce.

"One day you may find out. I want to know who *you* are."

"I'm Bruce Danizon, Sir Richard Danizon's nephew. If you hurt me—"

"Just do what you're told and you won't get hurt."

"If you think you're helping Bristow—" Bruce began.

Mannering clapped a hand over his face, not savagely but enough to hurt.

"I'm helping Bristow, John Mannering and a lot of other people," he growled, his lisp even more pronounced. "And you're going to help me help them. You can have your choice—knockout drops, or be bound hand and foot and have your lips taped."

Bruce seemed to be struggling for breath.

"You—you can't do this to me! You can't—"

He was inside the roomy rear space of the car, Mannering was at the door, leaning inside. And Mannering did a simple thing: he nipped Danizon's nostrils tightly and pushed his head back, then thrust a tiny capsule into his mouth, no larger than an aspirin tablet. Danizon gulped wildly but could not prevent the capsule from

going down. Mannering let him go, and took a brandy flask from his hip pocket.

"Shall I pour this down your throat or will you drink it?"

Danizon was looking at him from the corners of his eyes, obviously terrified.

"What—what are you going to do with me?"

"Put you to sleep, collect some of your precious friends, including your cousin Belle, and—"

He stopped for Bruce Danizon suddenly slumped to one side. This was no feint; the contents of the capsule had taken effect as soon as the casing had dissolved.

"Well, I didn't need the brandy," remarked Mannering, and he slid the flask back into his hip pocket. "He'll be out for at least six hours."

He went out of the garage and locked the doors, slipped the keys back on to his chain, and got back into the M.G. Questions were already crowding in his mind. Sometime during the afternoon, of course, someone would probably arrive to relieve Danizon, in which case it would soon be realised that he was missing; if the car were reported stolen, Mannering would be in trouble. He drove back to Putney; it being Saturday afternoon, there were several empty parking places. He pulled the M.G. into one, pocketed the keys, and drove off in his Allard.

It was nearly a quarter to five; he had dealt with Bruce Danizon in less than an hour. The reflection made him laugh aloud, but there wasn't really much to laugh at, yet. He watched his mirror closely, made sure he wasn't followed, and drove to Chelsea. He was about to turn into Green Street when he saw a young man sitting in an M.G. outside his house, and for a wild moment he thought that it was Danizon.

Instead it was a fair-haired stranger.

Mannering drove past, aware of the attention which his Allard attracted, reached the Embankment at the far end of the street and turned towards the heart of London. Once sure that he wasn't followed, he headed along Chelsea Bridge Road, for the West End. Two Chelsea pensioners in their sadly gay uniforms were on a pedestrian crossing and as he waited for them a white M.G. pulled up behind him. For the second time his heart lurched, but then he saw the little red-haired girl beside the youth who was driving. He drove on, and a few minutes later the M.G. roared past.

Soon, he was pulling up into a parking space outside Quinns.

As far as he could tell, no one was watching the shop, but there was no way of being sure. He pulled off the moustache, got out of the car, and strode—his walk natural now—to the rear of the row of shops. Letting himself in, he paused for a moment in the small square hall, its walls lined with centuries old panelling.

"You in, Josh?"

Almost immediately Larraby called down.

"Yes, I'm here." His white head appeared at the top of the narrow, crooked staircase, and his smile of welcome suddenly froze. "Who—?" he began.

"Just up to my old tricks," Mannering said, and went briskly up the stairs. In spite of the unmistakable timbre of his voice and his movements, Larraby looked a little taken aback. "It won't take me five minutes to get back to normal," Mannering assured him. "Can you run to a cup of tea?"

"Of course," said Larraby. "I'll get it at once."

He turned into his tiny kitchen while Mannering went

into the bathroom which was almost as small and quite immaculate. He cleaned most of the greasepaint off with alcohol from a bottle in the make up case and then locked the case. He washed, brushed the grey out of his hair, and went into Larraby's living-room.

It was almost like going into the living-room of an Elizabethan cottage. Two huge oak beams, dark with age, supported the ceiling, other beams were built into the white, uneven walls. Floor and ceiling were uneven, like the walls, and yet the two dormer windows gave surprisingly good light. This had once been used as a storeroom and office at Quinns, before Mannering had bought it. When he had made it ready for Larraby he had given the old man a free hand to furnish it as he liked.

Larraby had excelled himself. Warm reds and greens on chairs and carpet, glowing copper and brass; there was not a piece of furniture less than two hundred years old. The stools on which Larraby placed tea, paper-thin brown bread and butter and rich, dark fruit cake, dated from the early years of the first Elizabeth.

Larraby poured out, sat back in a small armchair, sipped, and asked: "Did the emergency concern Mr. Bristow, sir?"

"Emergency? How did you—oh. The disguise."

"I certainly inferred an emergency from that."

"I can imagine you did. Yes, it did concern Bristow, and he certainly has a problem." Mannering passed on the gist of what Bristow had told him, knowing that the secret was as safe with him as it could be with any man alive. By the time he had finished telling what had happened to Bruce Danizon, Larraby was chuckling.

"A very neat turn of events indeed," he approved. "I—" He broke off abruptly and stared intently at Man-

nering. "I *think* I can see what is in your mind," he breathed.

"If I can kidnap one young man—" began Mannering.

"Why can't you kidnap all the young people suspected in the thefts," cried Larraby, and he looked positively delighted. "Why not, indeed!"

"There is one snag," Mannering murmured.

"If there's only one, sir, it can present no great problem."

"Where can I hold them?" asked Mannering.

"Surely at the cottage."

"*All* of them?" asked Mannering.

"I really don't see why not," replied Larraby. "The—ah—sexes can be segregated, at least by night, and I am quite sure I can arrange to have the cottage guarded. Spencer's away, of course, but we can spare Wainwright, and I suppose we *could* spare Smith—"

"I don't think I trust Aristide enough yet," said Mannering. "Have you learned anything about his recent movements?"

"Not yet, sir," said Larraby, putting down his cup. "More tea?"

"Thanks," said Mannering. "No, Josh—we'll leave Aristide out of this for the time being, once I'm satisfied that he hasn't been double crossing us we may find a use for him. Now—let's go over the situation at the cottage. It's one thing to use it as we have in the past, for one or two prisoners, but—"

He broke off, frowning, seeing the cottage in his mind's eye.

It was a tiny one with a thatched roof, not far from the river at Maidenhead. It was Lorna's, and at one time she had often gone there to paint, when she was tired of the

heat and bustle of London; but these days she did most of her painting in the attic studio above the flat. There were two small rooms at the cottage where two people could be locked in, and the glass and windows were reinforced.

"No," Mannering said abruptly, "it won't do. Perhaps it's one of those bright ideas that are impracticable, Josh."

Larraby, knowing his employer so well, did not argue.

Mannering went over the situation in his mind with very great care. Five wealthy collectors had been robbed; each one had a young son or daughter, who had been suspected of working with the thief, but Bristow had been able to prove nothing. There were, however, strict limits to what Bristow could do, even limits to what he could say to members of a family who were no more than possible suspects—in fact, hardly suspects at all.

In his mind, Mannering equated them with Aristide Smith.

Into the quietness of his reflections, the telephone bell rang. Larraby got up immediately to answer. Mannering hardly noticed him go and could only just hear his gentle voice. He kept seeing Bristow's face and feeling Bristow's sense almost of hopelessness. Now and again he reminded himself of young Bruce Danizon, waiting and watching outside the Putney flats.

Larraby came back, sat down, and said: "That was Pendleton, sir. The enquiry agent."

Pendleton—*Pendleton!* Suddenly, Mannering was fully alive to what Larraby was saying.

"Well?"

"He has a very interesting report on Smith," stated Larraby. "He has, apparently, been attending classes of a particular variation of yoga."

"What!"

"That variation in which the mind controls the body, sir—and particularly in regard to receptivity to new ideas."

Mannering looked almost bewildered.

"New ideas which come from where?"

"Emanations, sir."

"Ah," said Mannering. "Emanations from another and more powerful mind. Is that it?"

"Precisely," said Larraby. "Apparently Pendleton has a very bright young woman on his staff and she attended one of these classes. She was the agent who investigated Smith's recent movements."

"Well, well," said Mannering heavily. "You—ah—you didn't happen to ask Pendleton whether he has a list of the pupils or students or acolytes or whatever they call themselves, did you?"

"He volunteered the information that the young woman is attempting to get such a list, although I gather it is more confidential."

"Who is the master-mind?" asked Mannering.

"A man named Yenn, sir."

"Do we know anything about Yenn? Or does Pendleton?"

"He is sending over a photograph, sir—one which the young woman took when she attended the class."

"She seems a very intelligent young woman," remarked Mannering. "Yoga-proof, do you think?"

"Pendleton thinks so, sir."

"Is she coming here?"

"She will be here in about half-an hour, sir. I thought if you could wait that long you would like to see her."

"I would, very much," said Mannering. "I've just time

to finish cleaning myself up before she arrives."

He went back to the bathroom, where he took particular care with cleaning off all remaining signs of make up, and speculated on the girl agent Pendleton was sending. *Was* there any way of being quite sure that she was yoga-proof?

He laughed to himself.

He heard the telephone bell ring again and Larraby's soft voice in response; a moment later Larraby was at the door.

"A gentleman would like to speak to you, sir."

"Who is it, do you know?" asked Mannering.

"He didn't give his name," Larraby said.

Mannering went to the telephone, still thinking of Pendleton's 'young woman' and the company Aristide had been keeping. He should have expected what followed, and afterwards he was amazed that it had taken him so completely by surprise.

"John Mannering," a man said in a deep voice, "unless you release Bruce Danizon within the hour, I will ruin you."

9

THE THREAT

The voice was deep and vibrant, and although it held no laughter it seemed to Mannering that he could hear laughter, deep and sinister, in the far off background. He was taken so utterly by surprise that for a moment he did not speak, but very soon he told himself that if he did not answer then the fact that he was thunderstruck would be obvious to this other man.

So he said, in an aside: *"Push that chair up for me, Josh,"* in a casual-sounding way, and then went on: "I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear you."

"You heard me," the other rasped.

"My dear sir," Mannering said sharply, "I don't at all like your manner. And if you will speak further from the mouthpiece the telephone will not vibrate so much." He paused again, then added in another aside: *"Thanks."* In fact he was already sitting and Larraby was not within earshot but was in the kitchen, no doubt washing-up or stacking the tea things.

The stranger spoke again, and now his voice sounded less vibrant.

"I told you to release Bruce Danizon."

"Who is Bruce Danizon?" asked Mannering.

"You know very well who Danizon is."

"I had a visit from a Miss Belle Danizon," said Mannering. "And I saw her at the Charity Ball. Is she anything to do with the Danizon you're talking about?"

"I've told you to release him at once, or else—"

"Oh, really," protested Mannering, and slowly but firmly replaced the receiver.

He was not certain whether his tactics were right or not, but did not see what else he could have done. The speaker could not be sure that he had kidnapped Danizon, at best he could only guess; he would now have to try to find out.

And yet he had *seemed* sure...

But he could, at most, know that Danizon had driven away. Even if that had been against instructions, how could the man be sure it was a case of kidnapping? Even if he had found the car parked by the station, he couldn't be sure. Had he been in the same position and had Bruce been Aristide, say, Mannering would have assumed that he had parked the car and gone after someone who had travelled by train.

The speaker could only have guessed Mannering's responsibility for the disappearance—but why had he assumed the worst?

Was it assumption or did he know?

Mannering thrust the thought aside, and concentrated on what to do with Danizon and with the other young people if he did make a clean sweep of them all. There was something very enticing about the idea. He had a sudden thought, and telephoned his flat. There was no answer, so Lorna wasn't back yet. He went to the kitchen and saw Larraby putting away the last cup.

"The gentleman telephoned to order me to release the prisoner," he said drily.

Larraby turned.

"He certainly loses no time."

"No," admitted Mannering. "He doesn't lose enough—

he's over-anxious. I still can't think of a place to incarcerate half-a-dozen strong and healthy young people, Josh—"

He broke off, stared for a moment, then turned and looked out of the living-room window, over Hart Row. Then he went to the landing and looked out over a strip of vacant land which was up for sale for a small fortune. Beyond this was the blank wall of a modern office block and the car park. The side and back entrances of Quinns could not be overlooked—only the front entrance in Hart Row.

"What is in your mind, sir?" asked Larraby, gently.

"The strong room, here," answered Mannering, as quietly.

"The strong—" began Larraby, only to break off as if astounded or appalled. "But that's full of—" Again he stopped, and this time gulped. "The strong-room, sir," he repeated, weakly.

"That's the very place," said Mannering. "Impregnable, air-conditioned, and with its own cloakroom. We've some folding beds and could get more, or some cushions. There are three different rooms, and electric points so that they can boil water. Josh—how long will it take to get some food and oddments down there?"

"Little more than an hour I would say, sir. There is a delicatessen nearby."

"Good. Get it done, will you? Young Danizon's all right where he is for at least another three hours, and—"

"Mr. Mannering, my first reaction was of enthusiasm but on second thoughts—" Larraby paused; he spoke as if he had a frog in his throat. "I do beg you to consider the very grave dangers in taking such a course."

"There would be dangers, anyway, Josh."

"Mr. Mannering—sir—I don't think you fully appreciate—" Larraby gulped again. "It would involve you *and* Quinns, and if it were to fail—if for instance none of these young people was involved in the thefts—then the consequences could be very grave indeed."

Mannering frowned.

"Yes, Josh, I know."

"*Is* it worth such a risk?"

"The man on the telephone said that I must release Danizon or be ruined," Mannering stated.

"He would no doubt do his best to make trouble, sir."

"Do you want me to release Danizon?" inquired Mannering.

After a lengthy pause for consideration, Larraby answered: "No, sir."

"Then whatever I do, there's a risk."

"If you take this seriously—"

"Don't *you* take it seriously?" asked Mannering

"Yes, I suppose I do," conceded Larraby, although he sounded only half-convinced.

"Josh, listen to me," said Mannering. "You had the visit from this young woman, you know the odd way she talked to me. You know that Aristide was attacked or kidnapped or else has been made disloyal. You know what has happened to Bristow and you know how the tape-recordings are being used to try to frighten me. You know that at least five extremely wealthy men have been persuaded to keep quiet about substantial losses." He paused long enough for all this to sink in, and then added sharply: "Don't you?"

This time Larraby sounded more convinced.

"Yes, sir."

"Then it must certainly be taken seriously, Josh. And it must be stopped."

"It must, sir." Larraby closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed his forehead in a characteristic gesture. "I will see what folding beds and mattresses there are."

"Good. And after Pendleton's young woman has arrived we'll go to the strong room and make some space."

"Sir—" began Larraby.

"Now, Josh!"

"Sir—there *is* a fortune in the strong-room. If in their resentment any of those young people ran amok—"

"Yes, I know," Mannering said soberly. "I think that worries me most. I -ah, there's your front door bell. What is the young woman's name?"

"Kitt, sir."

"Kitt what?"

"Annabel Kitt," answered Larraby. "I'll go and let her in."

He went out, and as Mannering heard him making his way down the stairs he went to the window and looked down. Obviously it was possible that there was someone other than Annabel Kitt at the back door, which was Larraby's front door whenever the shop was closed.

The only odd thing Mannering noticed about the young woman on whom he looked was that her hair—she wore no hat —was cut in an old-fashioned Eton crop. In these days of lank-haired youths and long haired girls this made a considerable change. As he had a distorted view he had no idea what she looked like, except that she wore a biscuit-coloured sweater and that she was thin. From the window, in fact, she looked more an old-fashioned boy than modern girl.

The back door opened, and she disappeared. Larraby's voice sounded, then hers, and it was very soft and pleasant. Footsteps followed and Mannering was at the living-room door to welcome Annabel Kitt.

She looked like a boy at close-quarters, too, thought Mannering; lean and long legged, but a boy dressed up as a girl, for her lips had too much lipstick, her eyes were buried in green eyeshade and her artificial lashes were as black as soot.

She smiled; she had a nice smile.

"Miss Kitt?"

"Mr. Mannering." She came in. "I had to give you this note from Mr. Pendleton, who thinks you might think I'm a fake." She took a sealed note out of her shoulder-strap handbag, and gave it to him. In Pendleton's unmistakable writing and on his headed notepaper was a note:

Dear Mr. Mannering,

This is Annabel Kitt, who has been investigating the interests of Aristide Smith and comes to report in person.

Yours sincerely,
J. P. Pendleton.

"Come and sit down," Mannering said, drawing her into the front room. "I had the provisional report by telephone."

"About Bernard Yenn and his yoga hypnotic session which Aristide attends so faithfully?" asked Annabel Kitt. She sat down and crossed her legs. "The sad thing about Aristide and the others is that they so want to have something to believe in, almost something to worship." She smiled again. "Did you know that Aristide Smith was a seeker?"

"No." Mannering saw Larraby by the door and beckoned him in and pointed to a chair. "A seeker of what?"

"Truth. A philosophy which will lead mankind to happiness. A leader. And they *all* think Yenn is a kind of God-sent gift to them. It's a strange thing," Annabel Kitt added, in the manner of a sage octogenarian, "but so many young people seem to fall for the fakes and the phonies." She was looking through the big leather bag with the preoccupied air of a woman who knows perfectly well she has what she is looking for, yet has a sneaking feeling she might have left it behind.

"And you think Bernard Yenn is a fake?"

"Oh, yes. I also think he is a crook." She darted Mannering a glance with those soot-ringed eyes and he was impressed by the directness and the shrewdness of them. At the same time she took out a photograph and handed it to him. "I have a secret camera," she said. "It takes very good likenesses."

Mannering looked down at the face of the man who had been with Belle and Bruce Danizon at the Charity Ball the previous night.

. . .

"So this is Bernard Yenn," Mannering remarked.

"That is the Master, the Tutor, the Leader, the Lord."

"Does he really call himself any of that?"

"No. He simply behaves like them all in turn. As a matter of fact I've been to several classes and haven't discovered a single thing which could prove he is a crook or even a poseur or charlatan. But there's something about the man which is..." Annabel Kitt flashed Man-

nering a smile and went on very quickly—"the opposite of you, Mr. Mannering."

"And that opposite is?"

"Evil," she said simply. "He talks—but would you like to hear him?"

"Very much. Can I?"

"In these days of tape-recorders in the backs of lighters and wristwatches, as easily as seeing his photograph," stated Annabel Kitt. She began to rummage in her bag. "I managed to get the names of all the students in my group, by the way. Each group has two classes a week."

"I see. And the names are—"

She took what looked like a cigarette lighter from her pocket and busied herself opening the back of it. Working on a concealed hinge, it revealed the smallest tape recorder Mannering had ever seen. He was vividly reminded of the tape-recorder in his study and outside this shop. She did not switch it on, but continued in the same matter-of-fact tone:

"Charley Clawson, Eric Frewin, Maria Rocco, Aristide Smith, Frank Bennett, Bruce Danizon, Esmeralda Devon and me. How does that sound?"

Again she shot Mannering a swift glance, as if to judge the effect of the names on him, but he had learned to school himself against her sudden surprises and all he said was: "Aristide Smith."

"Very earnest, too. He wants to put the world right, and even worse, he thinks it can be done."

"Very touching," Mannering said. "And very cynically said by you."

"Oh, I *am* cynical," declared Annabel Kitt. "In a job like mine, Mr. Mannering, you soon lose your faith in human nature. Just in case you need them, I've written

those names down." She delved into the bag again. "I do hope I'm being helpful."

"You are being very helpful indeed."

"Your only fear is that I may have been brainwashed by Bernard Yenn," Annabel said wickedly.

"Have you been?" asked Mannering drily.

"I think I'm proof against it," she said. "I can tell you this, Mr. Mannering. There is an inner study group to which Aristide Smith and most of the others have been invited but I haven't. I don't know whether Yenn suspects my *bona fides* or whether he thinks I'm too thick-skulled for him to get through to. You can trust me, I assure you. I wish your Aristide Smith were half as trustworthy."

"So do I," Mannering said grimly. "Incidentally, do you recognise any of these?" He showed her Lorna's sketch.

"Oh, aren't they beautifully drawn!" Annabel exclaimed. "The artist—is it *you*?"

"No. My wife."

"Well, do congratulate her for me, she's caught their expressions so well. That's Yenn, when all's going well, Bruce when he's had a drink or two, and Belle Danizon—she's Bruce's cousin, but you probably know that—as she always is."

"Does she attend the meetings?"

"She's usually with Yenn," answered Annabel. "And now I really must go!" She sprang up, shook hands, hitched the bag higher on to her shoulder and turned towards the door. There was something very likeable about her: indeed, quite endearing, thought Mannering. "I can see myself out," she offered, but Larraby insisted on going down with her, and Mannering could not resist going to the window.

Soon, she was turning away from Larraby, hand raised in farewell.

The next moment a car engine started up on the car park, revving loudly, and Mannering, startled, switched his gaze towards it. He saw a small white M.G. move forward at astonishing speed—obviously a racing start. Its engine roared, drowning Mannering's bellow:

"Annabel! Look out, look out!"

She turned round.

He saw the look of horror on her face and yet she did not move; it was as if she were mesmerised by the car hurtling towards her.

It was hideous to see the way her slender body was thrown into the air.

. . .

Police cars were coming, an ambulance was coming, a crowd was gathering, when Larraby's telephone bell rang. Mannering answered, feeling sick at heart.

"Mannering," he said flatly.

"I hope I don't have to warn you again," said the man he now knew as Bernard Yenn.

10

THE STRONG-ROOM

Mannering could not bring himself to speak. His jaws clamped together and he gripped the receiver so tightly that the tension hurt. Then, very slowly, he lowered it to the stand. Larraby was watching in obvious concern, disquieted by Mannering's expression

"That was Yenn," Mannering said. "If he calls again, take a message. On no account will I speak to him."

"I understand, sir. Did he . . . ?" Larraby began, and faltered.

"He obviously knew about and approved the murder of Annabel Kitt. Have you or the police been able to get in touch with Pendleton yet?"

"No, sir. I believe he was going to the country for the night."

"All right. Leave it to the police."

"Superintendent Gordon is here, sir, and would very much like to see you," Larraby said.

"His words?" asked Mannering.

"Verbatim, sir."

It did not sound like Gordon, the detective whom Mannering had seen at the Albert Hall. Gordon was a very different type of man from Bristow. A stickler for rules and regulations, he had often protested, from the relatively inferior position of an inspector, that Bristow gave Mannering too much rope. Certainly Gordon wasn't a man to ask for an interview; rather would he assert his

rights as a police officer and demand one.

"Where is he?" asked Mannering.

"In our store-room, sir."

"I'll take him to my office," Mannering said, and turned away. For some reason, he glanced round and saw Larraby's shoulders sag, saw how very tired he was, and how old. He was reminded vividly of Bristow when they had first met that afternoon, and he needed no telling what a shock the latest move had been for Josh. He was too old for such crises as these.

"Are you all right, Josh?"

"I—I am a little shaken, sir."

"Will you take your shoes off and loosen your tie and rest for an hour or two?"

"But, sir, you—"

"If I need you, I'll send for you," Mannering promised. "And I think I shall need you, Josh, but not until later."

"Please—please don't let me sleep if you need anything done," Larraby pleaded. "It would distress me so much afterwards, and do more harm than good."

"I know," Mannering said, and smiled. "I'll call on you."

"Thank you, sir."

This is the very last time, Mannering thought savagely to himself that I work him to death! Part of his anger with himself was really with Bernard Yenn, of course, he had not yet recovered from the awful sight of that flying body. Annabel Kitt had been such an endearing person, so full of life, so briskly and reassuringly efficient.

And Yenn had wiped her out as if she had been a fly.

Mannering went downstairs, grim-faced, knowing that in this mood he had to be extremely careful what he said

to the police. At the foot of the narrow, winding staircase was a narrow hallway; on the right was the back entrance to the shop, straight opposite the stairs was the street door—now open and with a uniformed policeman—and on the left was the door to the store-room. This was a windowless room, used for keeping pieces of furniture, *objets d'art* and pictures, which were 'resting' from the shop itself. The room was cramped, but there was space to see each individual piece and picture, and everything was spick and span.

Gordon was standing by a refectory table, polished to its present sheen by centuries of labour in a now derelict monastery. He was a serious, square-chinned man, broad-featured but despite his freckles, quite handsome. He had black eyebrows, which accentuated the keenness of his expression.

The two men shook hands.

"A shocking thing," Mannering said briefly.

"I'm told you saw it."

"I doubt if I'll ever really get it out of my mind."

"Did you—did you get any impression at all of the driver's appearance?" Gordon seemed to hold his breath with hope.

"No," Mannering answered bitterly. "I was almost vertically above the car and I didn't see his face. I can tell you that he was gripping the wheel at the top, both hands close together." He demonstrated. "Oh—and he wore pale-coloured gloves."

"You could see *that*?"

"I was only a few feet away," Mannering reminded him. He was glad to talk, as glad to be able to study Gordon. There was no doubt that the other man was very tense, as if he were shaken by what had happened to the

girl; but the police were used to accidents, none of which was ever pretty.

"Did you get the car number?" Gordon asked.

"I've already told your patrol man that I saw it, but can't recall what it was. The moment it struck that girl—"

Mannering broke off, inwardly frowning and dissatisfied with himself. He should have got the number of the car as it had roared on; the Gordon he knew would soon suggest that he was deliberately withholding information.

But this new Gordon said: "It must have been hideous." There was a long pause and he began to crack his knuckles, like a man in great distress. "Mr. Mannering—forgive me being blunt. The girl *had* been here, hadn't she?"

"Yes."

"And her death was almost certainly connected with her visit."

"It's possible—she had been collecting information for me and came to pass it on."

"What was the information?"

"That one of my assistants here was mixing in strange company."

Gordon's next question—the old rule-of-thumb Gordon's would be: "What company?" and if Mannering hesitated even for a moment, there would be a heavy-handed: "I must remind you, sir, that it is a serious offence to withhold information relating to a crime." But it did not come instead, Gordon lowered his voice and asked: "Can I rely on anything I say being in absolute confidence, sir?"

"You most certainly can," Mannering said. "Let's go

into my office. There's no risk of being overheard there."

"I'd appreciate that, sir. I'll just tell my sergeant I won't be coming yet." Mannering heard him talking to a plainclothes man as he opened the treble lock of Quinns back door, cut off the electric alarm system, and stepped into the shop. Before his office door was open, Gordon was with him. "Plenty of my chaps outside," he said. "I know it isn't often you unlock this door without plenty of men about." He glanced round the office, where he had been only once or twice, then sat down on one of the William and Mary chairs, not knowing that one chair leg rested on a carpet which hid the entry to the strong-room.

Mannering opened a corner cupboard and took out bottles of brandy and whisky, a soda syphon and two glasses.

"Whisky or brandy?"

"Whisky please—with a splash of soda."

Mannering poured out two drinks, rather more soda for himself, watched Gordon toss down half of his and then square his shoulders, obviously bracing himself for what he was going to say.

"You know I've often disagreed with Bill Bristow about you, don't you?" he began abruptly.

"Yes," Mannering answered simply.

"I still think he showed you more favour than he should have."

"Do you?" asked Mannering, wary again now.

"Yes. And I'm beginning to think he's too soft-hearted. He—" Gordon gulped down the rest of his drink, placed his hands on the wooden arms of his chair, leaned forward and growled: "Answer me this: did you ever *pay* Bristow to favour you?"

"Good God, no!" gasped Mannering.

The question had come so unexpectedly that his response was absolutely natural and spontaneous; his astonishment showed in the way his eyes rounded, his lips dropped open. That was only for a second, but it was long enough to be wholly convincing. He looked and felt as rigid as Gordon, and it was Gordon who relaxed first.

"I was sure you didn't," he said. "He may be too softhearted, he may not have the ruthlessness a top policeman ought to have, but he's absolutely honest. Isn't that what you believe, Mr. Mannering?"

"I'd stake my life on it," Mannering said quietly.

Gordon leaned back in his chair, narrowed his eyes and said evenly:

"I believe you would. I can see what Bristow—" He broke off, took out a handkerchief and dabbed his forehead. Obviously what he had to say next was coming with even more difficulty. "If my superiors ever found out I'd been to see you about this they'd probably drum me out of the Force. Look, sir—" Gordon leaned forward, looking intently at Mannering—"there's a rumour at the Yard that Bristow's suspected of taking bribes. There's a lot of talk of there being conclusive evidence. I don't believe it's true. If there is any evidence to that effect, I believe it's fake. But I can't do a thing about it. And I don't know anyone at the Yard who could help Bill." Gordon moistened his lips. "But you could, sir. I think you're the only man who could. He—he's been a damned good friend of yours, you know."

"I know it very well," Mannering said. "How can I help him?"

"You—you could talk to him, find out what's really

going on. Do anything you can, let him know—let him know he's got friends. Not only you, but at the Yard. Let him know you're working for him and that if there's anything you can possibly do, you will. And—" it was hard to believe the effort Gordon was making to say what he had to say—"*I'll* turn a blind eye for once. So will most of—well, what I'm trying to say is, if you stick your neck out for Bristow, very few of us are going to try to chop your head off." When Mannering didn't respond at once he blurted out: "I can't guarantee everyone would turn a blind eye. But—"

"It's all right, Gordon," Mannering interrupted. "If I thought every member of the Force would try to chop my head off I'd still stick my neck out for Bill Bristow." He felt a strange contentment as he said that, hoping that at last he might be able to return at least part of the debt that he owed. And as Gordon relaxed, giving his forehead and neck a sweeping wipe with the handkerchief, he went on: "I knew there was trouble."

Gordon started.

"Over Bristow?"

"Yes. Bad news travels fast, you know. And—" Mannering sought for a convincing explanation, then went on quickly—"I'm having some bother myself, and the people concerned warned me that I couldn't expect help from the Yard this time. The implication was obvious. Can you tell me any more?" he added hopefully.

"I don't really know any more. Was this bloody awful thing that happened outside here anything to do with what's going on?"

"It could be," Mannering answered. "I had a call from a man I don't like, telling me it was a warning to me."

"Good God!"

"Another whisky?" asked Mannering, getting up and fetching Gordon's glass. He had not finished his own drink, and this time gave Gordon a little more soda. Handing the glass back, he went on: "Wouldn't it be wise for me not to tell you anything more? Better to leave it to me to do what I can and if I need help, get in touch with you."

Gordon sipped.

"Yes, it would be," he agreed, slowly. "Although I'll have to try to find this hit and run devil."

"Of course you'll have to do your job," Mannering said. "If I can be sure I can go ahead with mine—"

"You can be absolutely sure. And there must be some way to help," Gordon growled.

"There will be," said Mannering. "Don't have any doubt." He drank deeply, put his glass down and asked: "Sure there's nothing else you can tell me?"

"All I've heard is that there's been a hush hush inquiry into a robbery at Carlos Rocco's place, and that too much has been kept quiet," said Gordon.

If that was all that was generally known at the Yard, then the real truth was being very well kept, Mannering reflected, but his chief emotion was satisfaction that Bristow had friends with complete faith in him. His pleasure must have shown in his face, for Gordon, much more at ease, finished his drink and sprang up.

"I'll have to be going. If anyone should ask you why I was here so long, I shall say I believed you might be helping a client and I thought you might tell me more if I were on my own than if I had another officer with me—as I should have if I acted according to regulations. After all, that's what Bristow always said if he'd come for one of his cosy little chats with you! If he hadn't come so

often he wouldn't be in this mess." Gordon frowned. "You'd be surprised what a lot of talk there's been about you and old Bill over the years. Some of it has been passed on to the new Commissioner and the A.C.—that's what made them suspicious. You see that, don't you?"

"Only too well," Mannering said painfully.

It was some time after Gordon had left that he really recovered from the shock of Gordon's last statement; *he*, Mannering, was fundamentally responsible for Bristow's plight. This wasn't simply a case of taking risks to help an old friend: it was a deep-rooted obligation which had to be met.

If he failed Bristow, he would never really know peace of mind.

He locked up the shop and the store room and went upstairs, finding Larraby just getting up. He looked rested, poo poohed the suggestion that he was too tired to help, and went down with Mannering to the office. Between them they moved the chair Gordon had been sitting on, rolled up a carpet, and then Mannering pressed a spot on his desk, and part of the flooring opened to reveal a small staircase. Mannering descended, followed by Larraby, and at the bottom pressed a light switch, illuminating a narrow passage, which appeared to be blocked by a solid wall. But once again Mannering pressed a secret switch, and the wall slid open to reveal a room, some fourteen feet square, with shelves loaded with *objets d'art*, pictures hanging from the ceiling and fireproof steel safes standing against the wall at one side.

In all, there were three such rooms, as well as a cloakroom. Larraby had found three folding beds in addition to the bed already there, and Mannering could bring two more back from the flat.

Now, it was simply a matter of finding and kidnapping the group of young people who were so clearly under Bernard Yenn's influence.

Simply, thought Mannering, and laughed.

Then he remembered the venom in Yenn's voice and the ruthlessness the man had shown. There was nothing at all to laugh about in any of these things.

II

ONE—TWO—THREE

"John," Lorna said, "you must have some help. You can't possibly do this on your own." She sat, rather helplessly, on a pouffe in Mannering's study after their homely dinner that night. She had come back lively and intrigued by the exhibition, had gradually become aware of Mannering's preoccupation, and had then demanded the whole story.

Now, she knew it in detail. Mannering had no doubt that she would retain all the salient points and would almost intuitively know all the dangers. Looking at her, he realised that her reaction was astonishing. Not a single: "You can't do this!" No protest against what he planned, only "you must have some help."

This was a task everyone wanted him to carry out; there was not the slightest need to remind her of the obligation to Bristow.

"I thought so, at first," he said. "Josh will be at the shop—"

"Darling, he's too old and frail. It's just not fair."

"Try telling Josh that. And he'll only be there to let me in each time I take one of the brats there. He won't have to do anything."

"What about Lionel Spencer?" Lorna asked.

"He flew off to Paris yesterday," Mannering answered.

"We've two who could help, Aristide is one and Lionel

has to be on holiday," Lorna said vexedly. "Could we send for him?"

"Forty-eight hours is about as long as we've got," Mannering said. "And he's on his way to Yugoslavia."

"Only forty-eight hours?" Lorna was aghast.

"Can you imagine our Mr. Yenn being patient any longer?" asked Mannering, and when Lorna didn't answer, he went on: "I have a suspicion that he's had his own way for a long time, and isn't used to anyone fighting back. The quicker I can get one or two of the suspects the better. It might shake him badly. Will you hold the fort here while Josh looks after Quinns?"

"Yes," Lorna said slowly. "Yes, of course." She drew close to him. "You will be careful, won't you?" she asked anxiously.

"I certainly will," Mannering said reassuringly. "I'll be so careful no one will even know who I am. Not even you."

Lorna laughed.

Mannering squeezed her shoulder, then went to a loft ladder which led from a passage outside the bathroom, lowered it, and went up to the attic. Here there was a strong smell of oil paint, of wood and of varnish. Paintings in various stages of completion were about the walls, three—of sitters Lorna was painting now—were on easels. On one side there was a little alcove where she did her messy work and stored her paints. Near this was another alcove, where she had a dressing table mirror like those in theatrical dressing rooms. Lorna used this for close inspection of paintings; and Mannering used it when trying to decide how old an unidentified painting was.

He also used it for make-up.

His make-up prior to his visit to Bill Bristow, though

effective, had been slapdash and hurried compared with what he was doing now. He had learned the art of disguise from an expert, many years before, and had become a past-master at it. Gradually, with a few deft movements, the whole cast of his countenance became different. His cheek-bones looked higher, his jaw stronger, he seemed an older, harder, tougher man. He worked some yellowish rubber coverings over his teeth, and now there were two clearly discernible fillings which altered the look of his mouth when he spoke and smiled. Thin rubber cheek-pads not only filled out his cheeks but somehow lengthened his whole face. He worked a soft-setting wax into his nostrils, widening them, made sure he could breathe with comfort, then used a special gum at the corners of his eyes which dried and contracted the skin.

The whole operation took nearly forty minutes.

Finished, he changed his trousers to an older, baggier pair, inside the waistband of which was a thin coil of nylon rope of exceptional strength, and a comprehensive tool-kit, including a pencil-thin torch and a pair of blue cotton gloves.

At last, he was done.

As he went backwards down the ladder, he heard the telephone bell ring, and stiffened immediately. Lorna walked across the hall to answer it; speaking as Mannering touched the floor.

"Mrs. Mannering," she said; then gasped and seemed to shrink away as if some horror had come from the telephone. As in its way it was horror, for even from where he was Mannering could hear the laughter he had come to know so well.

Hurrying to the study, he found her looking white and strained. He took the telephone from her, and almost

immediately the laughter stopped and Bernard Yenn said in his menacing way:

"I've warned your husband. Now I'm warning you. I want young Danizon released—now."

Mannering didn't speak. Lorna had moved away and stared out of the window.

"And if he's not back home by eight o'clock tonight I'll slash your face until your husband will never want to see you again. Ever seen a woman disfigured, Mrs. Mannering?"

Slowly, deliberately, Mannering replaced the receiver.

Lorna obviously forced herself to ask: "What did he say?"

"He threatened what he would do to you if Bruce Danizon isn't back home by eight o'clock tonight," Mannering told her frankly. It was no good trying to deceive Lorna; she could always tell if he was prevaricating, or keeping something back from her; and this would only make her more frightened than she would be if she knew the whole story. He was tempted to try to persuade her to leave town, there were a dozen friends and relatives with whom she could stay: but he felt certain that it would be useless.

"Be very careful," he said.

"I'll lock myself in," she promised.

"Let no one in unless you're sure who it is."

"I won't," she assured him, and then stood back as if she were seeing him in his disguise for the first time. "John, you're absolutely incredible! I don't think even *I* would have recognised you if I hadn't known. Where—where are you going to start?"

"With Frewin," he said. "I'm going to telephone him."

When he sat down at the telephone his movements

were stiff and awkward; it was almost surprising to hear his voice.

"Is Sir Stanton Frewin in, please? ... John Mannering ... Yes, Mannering ... I'll hold on." He put out a hand to Lorna, who took it as Frewin came on the line.

"Yes, Mannering?" There was something sharp about his manner.

"I thought I ought to tell you that there are some odd rumours going round about you," Mannering said. "Did you know?"

"I really can't pay any attention to rumours. You should know better than that." Frewin appeared not to be even slightly interested in the rumours themselves. "And if you haven't anything better to do—"

"Frewin, have you any idea what your son is doing at this moment?" demanded Mannering.

"What has my son got to do with this?"

"With the rumours, a great deal."

"Damn the rumours!" Frewin exploded; obviously he was at a great pitch of nervous tension. "I know perfectly well where he is—in his room, with a friend, watching the last few minutes of the Ardingly Golf Tournament. Mannering, I really thought you had more sense than to pay heed to rumours."

"When I hear that one of my most respected clients is suspected of corrupting a senior police officer—"

"Mannering! Where did you hear such a lie?"

"If you'll be at the Collectors Club in half an-hour, I'll tell you," Mannering said. He rang off abruptly, turned to Lorna and said: "Telephone the club and ask the receptionist to tell Frewin I can't make it. Be very apologetic, won't you?"

"I'll talk to Frewin myself," Lorna promised.

Mannering nodded, pressed her arm, and then went out very quickly. The lift was at this floor, and he was in the street soon after seven o'clock. He saw a young man on a motor-cycle talking to a girl, but ignored them as they ignored him. He could not be absolutely sure but he had little doubt that they were Bernard Yenn's helpers, little doubt that had he appeared as himself, they would have attacked him.

Another young couple were at the end of the street, in a Volkswagen. Mannering turned past these, and walked along King's Road. The sooner he could get a taxi—the thought was hardly in his mind before one turned out of a side street, its sign alight. He hailed it and said in a voice no one would have recognised as his:

"Belmont Street, please."

Soon he was approaching the garage where he had left Bruce Danizon. He unlocked the padlock, and found Danizon still huddled up in the rear of the car. He opened the door, made sure that the youth was still unconscious yet breathing evenly, then half dragged and half-carried him out, unlocked the car boot, and hoisted him in. There was comfortable room. He went to the driving seat and turned the key in the ignition: the motor turned sluggishly at first but was soon roaring.

Half an hour after he had left Lorna, he drew up outside Frewin's house in Truscott Square, a Georgian Square still tranquil with its fenced off garden of trees and shrubs and well-kept grass, as yet unspoiled by the modern mania for change. Mannering went up three steps to the pillared portico, and rang the bell. There was no answer. He rang again, and at last an elderly man answered.

"Good evening, sir."

"Is Mr. Eric in, please?"

"If you will step inside, sir, I will find out. May I take your name?"

"Larraby," Mannering answered without hesitation. "He'll know the name."

He stepped into a rather shabby hall, where the carpet was threadbare and the paintings on the wall, as well as the old furniture, looked quiet and unspectacular. Few would have dreamt that each piece was a rare antique, each picture of great value.

The elderly man disappeared through a doorway on the right, opposite the stairs. The sound of a radio or television commentary filled the hallway as the door opened; above it came the sound of a young man's voice.

"Larraby? . . . All right, Baker, I won't need you."

A few moments later, Eric Frewin, a pleasant-looking, fair-haired youth, appeared in the hall, a slender, pale-faced girl behind him.

"No need to come, Maria," Eric said, and she stayed in the doorway while the youth came forward. "Mr. Larraby?"

"Yes," Mannering said in that unfamiliar voice. "I don't think we have met, sir."

"Don't you work at Quinns, for John Mannering?"

"That's right, sir," Mannering said. "I wonder if you could spare me a moment?" He looked deliberately past Frewin to the girl. "Did I hear you call the young lady Maria, sir?"

"Yes—Miss Maria Rocco," said Eric.

"Then what I have to say will greatly interest her, also," said Mannering. "If you could both spare me ten minutes I would be grateful."

"What *is* this about?" demanded Eric.

"A matter which very directly affects the father of each of you," Mannering stated.

Eric stared sharply for a moment, then led the way into a large, untidy room, one wall lined from floor to ceiling with tightly-filled bookshelves, a big coloured television set in one corner, a sofa and two easy chairs in front of it.

Maria moved swiftly to the television and switched off a picture of a golfer about to drive from the tee.

"*My* father?" she demanded. "What has he done?"

Her large dark eyes looked enormous in her pale face.

"Mr. Mannering knows, I do not," said 'Larraby'. "But I do know that both Sir Stanton and Mr. Rocco are likely to be in serious trouble with the police unless they are able to refute the charges."

"This sounds like a rigmarole of nonsense to me," Eric said sharply. "Where is Mannering? Why didn't he come himself?"

"He is, at the moment, involved at the shop, sir—at Quinns—and cannot get away. But I know he is greatly distressed. Your father left the house very hurriedly a short while ago, and—"

"I'll soon find out if *that's* true," said Eric. He strode out of the room, calling: "Baker! Is my father . . . ?" His voice faded.

Maria Rocco stood looking intently at Mannering.

"Have—have you any idea what this is about?" she asked.

"Only that there is some conspiracy which has to do with your father's collection and Sir Stanton's. Mr. Mannering would have come himself, if—"

Eric hurried back into the room.

"He *did* go out," he said. "How did you know?"

"Mr. Mannering told me, sir. If you could possibly come to the shop—I have a car outside—it would save a lot of time. I've never known Mr. Mannering so worried. I really haven't."

"Eric, we had better go," Maria urged. "We have time."

"How long will it take?" demanded Eric.

"I feel sure you will be back within the hour, sir," replied Mannering.

He did not plead again and there was no need, for both youth and girl moved towards the hall. Two minutes later they were sitting together in the back of the car, with Mannering at the wheel.

Fifteen minutes later they were outside the back entrance to Quinns, and Larraby was opening the door. Mannering stood aside for Eric and Maria to enter, went in after them, closed the door, locked it, and then took the automatic out of his pocket.

"Do exactly as I tell you," he said in his normal voice. "Then you won't get hurt."

The girl cried out.

Eric Frewin drew back, glaring, stared at the gun and raised his hand as if to try to knock it aside. Mannering fired, once, aiming wide. The report sounded very loud in the tiny hall and Eric drew in a hissing breath.

"What—what the devil *is* going on?" he demanded.

"That's what I'm going to find out," Mannering said. "Open the strong-room door, Josh."

"Josh!" exclaimed Eric. "That's Larraby's name. Who—"

"Let's say we're brothers," Mannering said, while Larraby, guessing what had happened, smiled to himself with deep satisfaction and led the way into Mannering's office, where the strong room entrance was already open.

12

THE SECOND KIDNAPPING

"My God!" breathed Eric Frewin. "You'll pay for this!"

"Think so?" asked Mannering mildly. "You must talk it over with your friends when they come and join you."

Maria Rocco managed to speak with praiseworthy calm, although her hands were tightly clenched and there could be no doubt of her fear.

"What—what are you trying to do? Why have you brought us here?"

"I am trying to find out the truth about a Mr. Bernard Yenn. I want to know where Mannering is involved, and I want to know what your parents have been up to," said Mannering. He crowded them down into the first room, then into the second. "Don't move," he warned, and backed away, pressing the door control. Eric made a half-hearted attempt to push through the gap as the door closed, but soon thought better of it.

Mannering said almost light-heartedly: "Two in one, Josh—and Bruce Danizon is outside. I'll have him here in a couple of jiffs." He made for the steps leading to his office, saying: "I called myself Larraby and said that Mannering wanted to see them."

"Very astute, sir," murmured Larraby.

Believe it or not, mused Mannering, as he stepped out into Hart Row, Josh looks younger.

No one was in Hart Row.

He opened the boot of the old car and saw Danizon's

eyes open, dazedly. He helped the youth out and supported him into the building, then into the office, and half pushed, half-dragged him down the stairs. He was still dazed from the drug. Mannering left him close to the wall separating the first and second rooms, pressed the control in the ceiling, and as the door began to open, called: "Look after your friend."

He was back in the office with the main entrance sealed before they could have realised who their 'friend' was. Larraby was sitting on the side of the bow-fronted desk.

"An excellent start," he remarked. "I'm no longer so apprehensive, sir."

"Josh, we mustn't let it fool us," Mannering said. "The other three aren't likely to be so easy. Are you all right?"

"I am very much enjoying the escapade," Larraby assured him.

Mannering laughed without much humour, and went out; Larraby would press the electric control button which made the door impregnable. It was now a little after eight-thirty and the first faint shadows of evening were falling over London, creating an early dusk. A few lights showed, cars passed along Old Bond Street, but none turned into Hart Row, and there was no sign of anyone watching.

Mannering got into the car and drove away.

As he turned the corner he was thinking that someone had known the moment that Annabel Kitt had arrived, and had been lying in wait for her. Add this fact to the equally significant one that no one was visible in Hart Row, but that Quinns could not be overlooked from anywhere else, and one thing screamed at him.

The shop and all that went on there was being watched

from some building in Hart Row.

Mannering turned into a side street and parked at one of a dozen empty meters; on Saturday evening this part of London was virtually deserted. He walked back to Hart Row, seeing a policeman talking to a sergeant further along, near Savile Row. That reminded him vividly of Gordon. Were these two men keeping a special watch on Quinns?

Passing the end of Hart Row, he glanced along it as he did so.

Two young men were crossing from one of the other shops and heading for Quinns. Mannering saw the doorway they came from—the side door of the firm of carpet importers with the name of Pandit & Co. Waiting a moment, he saw them go to the end of Hart Row and turn towards the back entrance, where they disappeared from view. Had the two policemen not been within sight he would have gone after them, but that would be asking for trouble. He quickened his pace and beckoned the policemen, and immediately the sergeant moved towards him. He was a man Mannering knew well and who had seen Mannering face to face a hundred times.

"Is anything the matter, sir?"

"I ah—yes," Mannering said in his assumed voice. "I saw two men go to the back of a shop there. They tried the front door first and then disappeared round the back. Of course it might be nothing, but I thought I should tell you."

"We'll soon make sure, sir." The sergeant took out his walkie-talkie radio, pulled up the mast, and spoke very quickly: "Suspected break-in at a shop in Hart Row, request mobile patrol at once." By the time he had finished, the constable, using raking strides, had drawn level.

"Hart Row," the sergeant said.

"Quinns?"

"Could be. Wait there, sir, please."

The two men crossed the road with startling speed, and Mannering saw them pause and peer into Quinns, then saw them turn the corner. Almost at once there was a shrill police whistle and the two youths came pelting back on their tracks.

Then Mannering saw that the side door of Pandits was open and a square of light showed against the gathering dusk. The two youths raced towards it, but the next moment the younger policeman appeared at the corner, and Mannering saw that he was going to make a flying tackle.

Nearing the doorway, the fugitives veered towards it, but before they could reach it the door closed and the light was shut off. For one vital second the fugitives faltered, and the young policeman, launching himself forward, caught one of them by the ankles, bringing him crashing down. The other youth spun round, to see what had happened to his companion, but on that instant a siren wailed nearby and Mannering saw a police car racing down from Oxford Street. The second youth took to his heels. He turned away from the car, and towards Mannering. That was his mistake.

As he stumbled past, Mannering simply put out a leg, and brought him down. The police car, slowing, was now only a few yards away. The passenger door opened and a patrolman sprang out. As if by magic, people appeared, from side streets, shops and hotels. Surprisingly quickly there was a small crowd.

It was comparatively easy, in the confusion, for Mannering, whom no one recognised, to slip away. The first

thing he did was to go into a telephone kiosk and call Lorna. There had been no telephone calls and no visitors, she told him, but the youth whom Mannering had suspected to be watching the flat was still outside.

"Yes, he's still there. By the way, Sir Stanton was very put out, darling."

"No doubt. His son was even more put out."

"You've got him?" cried Lorna.

"With Maria Rocco and Bruce Danizon," Mannering said with satisfaction. "Do something for me, sweet."

"Of course."

"While I go and get a meal, telephone Frank Bennett, Esmeralda Devon and Charles Clawson junior," said Mannering. "Find out where they're likely to be. I'll call back in half-an-hour."

"John, you must have a real meal, and half-an hour—"

"Is plenty," Mannering assured her. "If any of the trio is out of town try to find out exactly where they are."

"I will," said Lorna, resignedly.

In Oxford Street Mannering went into a crowded coffee bar-cum café, had a reasonable steak and a slice of apple tart and coffee, served quickly by a slim, mini-skirted waitress, whose long, tangled lashes reminded him too vividly of Annabel Kitt. It was still hard to believe that the girl had been so brutally run down. What would make a man so ruthless? What was Yenn trying to do? And how could he persuade so many young people to work for him? As he sipped a second cup of coffee, Mannering gave more attention to this aspect: how could Yenn or any man make youngsters behave as these were behaving?

Was it hypnosis?

Mannering found himself taking this almost for gran-

ted, and although he warned himself against it, the virtual certainty persisted.

How many other youths would do what Yenn ordered? How many others would kill? The question chilled him, and he gave an involuntary shudder as he stood up. Soon, in another telephone kiosk, he called Lorna again.

"Charles Clawson is at Brighton, but he'll be back tomorrow afternoon," she told him. "Esmeralda Devon is spending the weekend with her mother—you know the Devons were divorced, don't you?—in Hampstead, at 5, Kimble Lane. And Frank Bennett is spending tomorrow at Ashworth Golf Course. He will also be back home by three o'clock tomorrow afternoon," Lorna added. "Isn't that rather early for a weekend?"

"Yes," answered Mannering. "And two of them are coming back early. Lorna, my sweet."

"Yes?"

"If you feel the slightest bit worried, telephone Bristow. He'll arrange special protection."

"I'd almost forgotten he *is* still an active policeman," Lorna said. "All right, darling, I will if I feel worried. I wonder how he is?"

. . .

At that moment William Bristow was sitting alone in the room where he had received Mannering, looking at an indifferent television play. But his mind was elsewhere. For a while Mannering had raised his spirits, but now he was beginning to wonder whether he should have involved a man who was, after all, his friend.

The telephone bell rang, and he stretched one hand out for the instrument and the other to lower the volume

of the set.

"This is Bristow."

"Superintendent," a man said in a deep, almost vibrant voice, "two young men have been arrested for walking past the shop of your friend Mannering. I want them released. And if they aren't—" There was a pause, a curious laugh, and then the man went on: "You won't have any chance at all of saving your reputation. I can *prove* that you did what you shouldn't have done."

There was another pause. Then came the sound of deep, vibrant, menacing laughter.

Bristow put down the receiver, and cut off the television sound. He felt suddenly very cold. For a few moments he sat motionless, looking at the figures moving on the screen and mouthing words he could not hear. He was still motionless when the telephone bell rang again.

He stared at it, almost too apprehensive to answer. Then with a rough: "What the devil is the matter with me?" he snatched it up. But his whole body was tense as he prepared himself for the same voice, the same sinister laughter.

"Bristow," he said.

"Hallo, Bill." Instantly, he recognised Gordon, now equal in rank and so able to be on Christian name terms, but a man with whom he had never been wholly at ease. "I've just heard that there was an attempt to break into Quinns tonight. I thought you'd like to know."

Bristow tried to react as he would have reacted before the shadow had fallen.

"Has there, by Jove! Anyone caught?"

"The two men who attempted it," answered Gordon. "They were trying to get into one of the windows, and were both picked up and charged." There was a curious

tone in Gordon's voice, as if there were something else he wanted to say but didn't know how. To fill in the gap, Bristow asked:

"Have they got records?"

"That's the queer thing about it," Gordon replied. "One is Lord Hindlesham's son, and the other the son of a Member of Parliament. Both families have excellent reputations. It doesn't make sense."

"Have you talked to Mannering?" asked Bristow.

"I thought you would like to."

"I would," growled Bristow. "I'll call him. What's happening to the prisoners?"

"They're being held overnight and will appear in court in the morning—that's if their parents don't pull every string from the Home Office to Buckingham Palace to get them released. They pretend they were just skylarking, but according to the reports they acted like young demons before they were arrested."

"Could it be drugs?" asked Bristow.

"Lord knows."

"I'll talk to Mannering," Bristow said again. "Where will you be?"

"Oh, I'm at home," said Gordon.

"If I get any news I'll call you back," Bristow promised, and rang off. He held the receiver down only just long enough to make sure he could dial another number, and called Mannering's flat. Lorna answered at once.

"How nice to hear you," she said warmly. "How are you, Bill . . . ?" Nothing in her tone suggested that she knew about his problem and his meeting with Mannering. "No, he's out I'm afraid . . . I really don't know where, you know how unpredictable he is . . . Yes, I'll ask him to call you. Is everything all right? . . . I'm so

glad."

Bristow was smiling faintly when he rang off. Mannering would never really know how lucky he had been with his friends and especially with his wife. Or did he know? One thing was virtually certain: Lorna knew what he was up to even though she had given nothing away.

What *was* Mannering up to? Bristow wondered. He would have given a lot to know.

. . .

At that moment, Mannering was standing in the gloom of the evening at a driveway leading to Number 5, Kimble Lane, a lovely, low, red brick house which overlooked Hampstead Heath. Kimble Lane was deliberately secluded, with tall trees in the street itself and in all the gardens. Mannering knew it, and other short streets in the district, very well. His car was parked a few doors along.

In the garage at the side of the house a young woman in jeans and a tight fitting shirt was hosing down a white M.G.—a similar car to that which had been used to kill Annabel Kitt. As he watched, as the possibility that this *was* the killer came into his mind, Mannering felt an almost uncontrollable rage.

Then the girl became aware of him, started, and turned. He had seldom seen anyone so frightened. The hose snaked out of control, the jet hit the wall and then splashed on to the gravel outside the garage, hissing and spraying.

13

THE THIRD KIDNAPPING

She was more pretty than beautiful; looked almost more boy than girl. Mannering turned towards her, slowly, without the slightest indication of the savage anger that had torn through him. His smile was not 'Mannering's' smile but it was friendly and carried no menace. The girl struggled to mask her terror; turning off the water, she picked up the hose and placed it over the back bumper of the M.G.

"Good evening," said Mannering.

"Good evening," the girl said stiffly. Her hair was golden, hiding her ears; her eyes were blue; her lips were too full, almost pouting.

"Have I the pleasure of speaking to Miss Devon?"

"I am Esmeralda Devon."

"I'm very glad I caught you at home," Mannering said. "What a powerful looking motor car. An M.G. isn't it?"

"Yes. Why—?" She was breathing with short gasps and there could surely be only one reason: fear that he had come to inquire about the car.

"I have a message for you from Maria Rocco," Mannering stated.

Her face cleared, and there was an almost cat-like change in her body as she relaxed.

"What—what does she want?"

"She would very much like to see you as soon as possible."

"But—but I don't understand! If she wants to talk to me, why doesn't she telephone? Why on earth should she send a stranger?"

"She is in some distress," Mannering said glibly, "and I gather that she is in some difficulty about talking freely on the telephone." When the girl looked at him without speaking, he shrugged his padded shoulders and half-turned. "Well, I have done what I promised, there is nothing more that I can do. You could of course drive to—"

"No!" she interrupted, her face taut. "I—there's something wrong with the car."

"Really?" asked Mannering, moving towards it. "Perhaps I can put it right."

"No!" she cried again. "There's nothing you can do, absolutely nothing. What—what else did Maria say?"

"Just what I have told you: she would like to see you urgently—desperately, I should say."

He glanced down at the front wing of the little car. It was crumpled; not badly, as a collision of metal and metal would reveal, but as if the car had struck something heavy and soft. Again he had a picture of a girl's body flying through the air, but his expression did not change—not even when he saw the tell-tale brown stain of dried blood on the front bumper. In fact his smile broadened, and Esmeralda could not know that he was thinking that he would take her away even if he had to knock her out and fling her over his shoulder.

"I—I'd better go," said Esmeralda, "but my mother's out, and—"

"It shouldn't take long," Mannering said. "I will gladly take you there and bring you back."

"Have—have you a car?" She seemed surprised.

"Oh, yes, a few yards away. If you would care to get a coat—"

"I need a handbag," she said. "I won't be long."

She hurried through a side door of the garage, and he wondered whether she suspected him and was going to telephone Maria, or whether she was simply going to do what she said. At least she gave him more chance to look at the front of the car, to see the rest of the damage on the side which had struck Annabel. One of the front lamps was badly cracked and there was a spattering of brown spots of coagulated blood. He found himself clenching his teeth as he saw the crumpled number plate, memorised the number—PX 128P—and then went to the front of the house. Esmeralda Devon was shrugging herself into a thigh length leather coat. She walked with him towards the big old Austin.

"If you will give me the pleasure of riding next to me," Mannering said, opening the door.

It obviously did not occur to her to say no. And it did not seem to occur to her to ask him why they were going to the Mayfair heart of London when it would have been quicker to go direct to Knightsbridge, where the Roccos lived. Soon, he turned into Hart Row, and at last she realised something was wrong.

"Where on earth have you brought me?" she demanded.

"Maria is here," he assured her.

Pulling up, he got out and sprang round to the other side of the car, taking her arm in a grip from which she could not have escaped even had she tried. But she appeared to believe him, especially when Larraby, so venerable-looking, opened the door and smiled a welcome. Not until Mannering led her to the steps of the strong-room did she make any attempt to free herself—

but his grip was like a steel trap, and he forced her downwards, pressed the door control button, and thrust her in with the others.

"Esmeralda!" one of the men cried.

"Keep away from the door," Mannering ordered, and stood so that they could see him and the gun in his hand. As Esmeralda went through, Bruce Danizon appeared at the opening, and for the second time Mannering recognised the youth's stubborn courage.

"I want to know what you're doing," he said clearly. "I insist—"

"I'm just keeping you out of Bernard Yenn's reach for a little while," answered Mannering, softly. "I don't want any more hit and runs like we had this afternoon. Whose car is it, Esmeralda? Yours—or a friend's?"

Esmeralda was out of sight but her gasping voice sounded clearly.

"Oh my God! He knows!"

"You would be astonished at just how much I do know," said Mannering; and then he pressed the control and the door slid to. He turned, and went slowly up the steps and into his office. Surprised at how tired he suddenly felt, he dropped into the armchair which usually stood over the entrance to the strong-room.

The next moment, Larraby appeared at the door.

"Hallo, Josh," said Mannering with forced lightness. "I thought you'd got lost."

"No, sir," Larraby said. "And I really do congratulate you, sir—it is a remarkable feat. I—ah—I *am* a little troubled, however. I have some reason to believe that we are being observed from the flat above Pandit's, and if that is true then I should imagine that even in your present guise you will hardly be safe when you leave."

After a long pause, Mannering said grimly: "No. And I'm slipping, Josh, or I would have thought of that. The question is, how do I get out of here without being seen?"

Larraby had no suggestion to make.

Mannering got up, took a bottle of brandy from the corner cupboard, poured a little into two glasses, and handed one to Larraby. As he did so, the telephone bell rang, sounding loud and aggressive.

"All right, Josh." Mannering crossed to the telephone and lifted the receiver. "Who is that?" he asked, in a carefully assumed voice.

"Never mind who it is—I want to talk to Mannering."

He sounds angry, Mannering thought with satisfaction, and an angry man is a frightened man. He could hear the other breathing, quickly, harshly, as if he was labouring under a great strain.

"If you'll give me your name and number I'll ask him to call you," he said blandly. "Mr. Mannering will be telephoning within the next half hour."

"You mean he's not in?"

"He's not in at the moment, no, sir. But if you'll leave your name and number..."

"Brown," the man interrupted. "And my number is Bond Street 87109. Have you got that?"

"87109 Bond Street—is that right, Mr. Brown?"

"Yes," rapped the caller, and slammed down his receiver.

Mannering smiled, lighter hearted than he had been since the afternoon's tragedy. He sniffed his brandy, and moved to the curtained window.

"Well, Josh, I'm pretty certain that that was Yenn. And either he's fooling me very cleverly or he's very

worried indeed. And he gave me a Bond Street number, which suggests that he's on the other side of Hart Row in person. He's seen the police grab two of his young men, he's seen me bring Esmeralda here, and he may have seen me bringing the others as well. He's anxious to get them back, and he's at his wit's end to know what pressure to bring to bear on me." Mannering was standing with his back to the window, frowning in concentration. "If I were in his position, what would I do?" He paused, and then went on softly: "There is only one thing he *can* do, Josh. Try to turn the tables by kidnapping Lorna." Now Mannering was at the telephone again, dialling Whitehall 1212. Almost at once an aloof voice came:

"Scotland Yard—can I help you?"

"Mr. Bristow, Mr. Gordon, or whoever is on duty in their place."

"Mr. Gordon's just come in, sir, I'll put you through." No "What name?" No formality of any kind, just brisk efficiency, a click, then Gordon's voice on the line.

"Gordon here."

"This is John Mannering," Mannering said briskly.

"Good evening, Mr. Mannering." Obviously someone else was in the office—unless Gordon had regretted his mood of that afternoon. "Were you aware that two men were arrested this evening for an attempted break-in at Quinns?"

"*Arrested?*" Mannering echoed.

"Yes," Gordon said. "Did you know they had attempted to break in?"

"I'm not surprised," Mannering said briskly. "Someone is working very hard to scare me, and I've just had a caller who threatened to kidnap my wife if I didn't stop inquiring into some recent jewel robberies." He paused

just long enough to make sure that Gordon knew that he meant the 'secret' robberies which were so affecting Bristow, then went on: "Can you make sure she has special protection?"

Gordon was as brisk and prompt as Bristow would have been.

"Certainly, sir. Is she at your Chelsea flat?"

"Yes."

"Where are you, sir?"

"I'm moving about a great deal, there is a lot to do," Mannering said. Suddenly he recalled Esmeralda washing down the damaged M.G., and was appalled that he hadn't yet told the police of that. He must mention it straight away. "Gordon," he went on, "there's an M.G. in a garage at 5, Kimble Lane, Hampstead, which I think you ought to see."

"An M.G.—the *killer* car?" Gordon's voice rose in excitement.

"You should see it," Mannering repeated. "You will look after my wife, won't you?"

"Without the slightest loss of time," Gordon promised. "Goodnight."

. . .

While Mannering had been putting through his call to Scotland Yard, another man had also been speaking on the telephone: the man known as Bernard Yenn. His voice was harsh, as if he were having great difficulty in keeping his temper.

"There isn't any time—go and get her." There was a pause, and when he spoke again his voice sounded even harsher. "It isn't any use burning the place, I don't want

her dead, I want her alive. *Go and get her.*"

He was sweating when he put down the receiver. Wiping his forehead, he stepped to the window and looked through a narrow gap in the curtains at Quinns. He could see the street lamp reflected on the gilt lettering, on the tall, narrow, empty window, but he could not see the back of Quinns. He moved to another room, also overlooking Hart Row. Belle Danizon glanced round from a chair in the window.

"Has anyone moved?" he demanded.

"No—there hasn't been a soul in sight."

He leaned over her and looked out. From here he could see the corner beyond Quinns and the street lamp fastened to a wall bracket at the entrance to the passage. Undoubtedly anyone who left Quinns from the back would be seen crossing Hart Row to that footway. Yenn drew back, and looked down at Belle Danizon's golden hair; he had a near-suspicious look in his brown eyes.

"Are you sure you watch the whole time?"

"Quite sure," she said, wearily. "But I can't stay here all night, Bernard. When are the others coming?"

"They'll be here soon," he said, and moved away.

. . .

Lorna found it impossible to sit and read, or look at television. Restlessly she had something to eat, tidied the kitchen—the Mannerings had only a daily maid—and went up to the attic. She did not like painting by artificial light, even though she had some strip lighting which simulated daylight extremely well, but there was one portrait at a stage at which she could put in a certain amount of work. A blind was pulled down at the big

window overlooking the street, but through the roof-light in the ceiling she could see the stars.

She stood back from the painting and had actually picked up her palette, when there was a screech of brakes in Green Street. She sprang to the window and stared down. Three or four youths were racing towards King's Road, while men tumbled out of a car marked *Police*.

Her heart thumped and she began to breathe very fast.

Obviously, an attack on her had been almost ready for launching, and the police had arrived only just in time. But her relief soon gave way to acute anxiety. Could John get through the night safely? He was out there in the sprawling mass of London, alone.

She went back to the canvas, and picked up the palette again, but before she touched a brush the telephone bell rang. Only when she was in the apartment alone did she have it switched through to the attic.

"This is Mrs. Mannering."

"Superintendent Gordon, Mrs. Mannering," the caller said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, perfectly. I heard something going on in the street, but a lot of your men were there."

"Your husband asked us to make sure they were," Gordon said. "You'll be watched closely all the evening —in fact until the emergency is over."

"You're very good," Lorna said with obvious gratitude, and Gordon murmured a half embarrassed goodnight and rang off.

. . .

"There must *be* a way of getting to her," Bernard Yenn

said furiously. "There must be. I've got to find it."

Belle, still in the chair, was looking at him speculatively, while he gazed out of the window at the corner which led to the back entrance of Quinns.

14

ROOFTOPS

There was sudden tension in Larraby's flat when the telephone bell rang. It was only twenty minutes since Mannering had called the police, and the half hour he had decided on before calling Yenn was nearly up. Would this be Yenn again? Although so much was going well the tension was great; Mannering broke it quickly by lifting the receiver.

"Is Mr. Mannering there?" It was Gordon of the Yard.

"Hallo, Superintendent." Mannering's heart thumped. "No trouble, is there?"

"Well, sir, some youths *did* show an interest in your flat, but everything's under control now and there's no need to worry."

"I'm very grateful to you," Mannering said, his heart still thumping. "Did you catch—?"

"All four got away," answered Gordon, and rang off without saying goodnight.

Mannering put down the receiver slowly, drew his hand across his forehead, and told Larraby what had happened.

"It's a good thing I asked them to go to Green Street," he finished. "My God, if anything had happened to Lorna—*Four* of them, Josh!"

"Four what, sir?"

"Four youths tried to break into the flat. Two were caught here. We know there are others. How *many* others, Josh? That's the problem. Oh, well—" he shrugged—"I'd better telephone our friend and see what he has to tell

me." Lifting the receiver, he began to dial. Hearing the dialling tone go on for a long time, he grew anxious in case he had the wrong number or the man he believed to be Yenn had left. Then the man answered:

"Bond Street 87109."

"Ah, Mr. Brown," said Mannering affably, in his normal voice. "I believe you wanted to have a word with me."

"Mannering?"

"Yes, this is Mannering," Mannering said pleasantly.

He heard a guttural noise as if Yenn were clearing his throat. Then he spoke:

"I've warned you what will happen if Bruce Danizon isn't released at once."

"And so you have. You are going to ruin me, injure or kidnap my wife, and make me do exactly what I am told. You have cold bloodedly killed a young woman in front of my eyes to make sure that I will obey. Do I understand you fully?"

"Mannering, if you don't release Bruce Danizon you will never forgive yourself!"

Mannering laughed.

At first it was assumed laughter, calculated to show Yenn just how little he, Mannering, was affected by his threats, but quite suddenly it grew into the kind of laughter which had become so familiar—the laughter this man had used as a weapon with which to frighten his victims. It went on and on. Mannering could hardly control himself. But slowly the vigour slackened and the laughter faded; and he wondered whether he had driven Bernard Yenn *alias* Brown away.

"My God, I'll kill you," Yenn said in a grating voice. "I'll kill you with my own hands."

Then he slammed down the receiver, so that it echoed

deafeningly in Mannering's ear.

Mannering turned to Larraby, who was looking at him with excitement, obviously delighted with the way the tables had been turned. Mannering mentally reviewed everything Yenn had said. Why had he lost control of his temper so suddenly? There was something in Bernard Yenn which he simply did not understand.

"What is troubling you?" asked Larraby, his excitement quietening.

"I don't really know," Mannering answered slowly. "I can't say that Yenn or Brown or whatever his name is is acting out of character, because I don't know what his character is. But when we first became involved with the gentleman he behaved as if he had all the confidence in the world. Now, he doesn't seem to know which way to turn. In fact he sounds like a very frightened man."

Larraby smiled.

"I don't find that difficult to understand, sir. In your present mood you *are* frightening. Quite suddenly this man, obviously so used to having his own way, has found every path blocked and the ground falling away beneath his feet."

Mannering didn't respond.

"When were you first aware of the change?" asked Larraby.

"I've been trying to place it," answered Mannering. "After I took Bruce Danizon away, I suppose."

"Ah!" ejaculated Larraby.

"Meaning, he could be afraid of what Bruce Danizon could tell me," Mannering reasoned. "I wonder."

"Should you talk to him?" Larraby made that more a suggestion than a question.

"Soon," agreed Mannering. "Soon, but not just yet. I

have to get out of here without being seen, Josh, and there's only one way." He was more relaxed again at the thought of matching his wits against the watchers. "A very simple way, too."

"I don't understand, sir." Larraby seemed genuinely puzzled.

"By the roof," Mannering said. "I know I'm not as young as I used to be but these roofs shouldn't be much of a problem."

It was easy to see that Larraby had to check himself from saying: "Be extremely careful, sir."

. . .

The stars were very bright, and the first glow of the rising moon made beauty in darkness and shadow over the rooftops. The roof-light of Quinns was now closed behind him, and Larraby, making it secure against any possible attempt to force entry, had disappeared. Mannering felt a tremendous sense of exhilaration, for the night air was crisp, innocent of petrol fumes and smoke. He could see the lights of Knightsbridge and those of Piccadilly; at other points the floodlit dome of St. Paul's reared to the sky alongside the yellow dial of Big Ben and the twin towers of Westminster Abbey.

There was little noise apart from the occasional hum of car or taxi; and only once did Mannering hear the echo of solitary footsteps.

At last, and reluctantly, he moved towards a chimney stack. The brick crumbled slightly on his gloved fingers, a sign of its great age. The roof was conical, and he had to go very carefully to avoid slipping or dislodging a tile; but in a few moments he had crossed the roof of Quinns, and was moving gingerly across the next roof

and the next. Soon, hidden by a squat chimney stack, he was on the corner house of Hart Row and New Bond Street.

There were more people about than he had expected, and several policemen. Gordon must be watching the shop as well as the flat, thought Mannering. The lights here were too bright for him to climb down without being seen, but soon he came to a smaller house with a tiny yard behind it, recognising it as an exclusive picture gallery. Lowering himself to the edge of the roof, he went down on one knee, and gradually eased the other leg over the gutter.

Time seemed to recede.

Suddenly he was back in those days, at once so near and yet so far away, when he might be climbing across the roof of a house or shop he planned to burgle. Or he might, now, be on the run from the police, with men and cars stationed at every corner, searchlights combing the roofs, Bristow in charge of a force of police absolutely determined to catch the Baron.

He had always got away.

Gripping the guttering close to a stackpipe, where it would be firmer than in the middle of a long run, he groped with his foot for a ledge below a small window, tested his weight on it, was satisfied, then eased his other leg over the edge of the roof until both feet were on the ledge. Looking down, he saw another ledge, this one above a door; once he was standing on that he had only to lower himself to the ground.

Holding tightly to the guttering, he edged towards it—and the guttering cracked and sagged.

His heart gave a wild leap, but he flattened himself against the window, clutching the narrow pane in an

endeavour to take some of the strain off the guttering.

The difficult thing now was to lower his hands to the ledge on which he was standing. Gradually, allowing them to slide downward as he sank to a half kneeling position, he managed to do this. The rest was easy.

In a few seconds he was on the ground, dusting down his knees and elbows and the front of his jacket. His heart was still thumping and he had broken out into a cold sweat; he had not enjoyed that moment when the guttering had sagged.

Looking swiftly round, Mannering saw that the yard was enclosed by a high wall, covered with broken bottle glass. Seizing some old canvas, which was piled against the house, he flung this over the glass, and within seconds was over the wall. Slipping through a gateway, he found himself in a narrow alley, which led him into New Bond Street.

A policeman, testing the door of a record and music shop, glanced at him incuriously, so did a taxi driver obviously on the lookout for a fare. Mannering quickened his step, and a few moments later, found himself in Hart Row. There was Quinns, in darkness, except that a faint light showed at Larraby's window. And there, opposite Quinns, was a lighted window above Pandit's carpet shop.

Reaching the side door next to the carpet shop, he slipped into the shallow porch; it was certainly not deep enough to hide him if anyone noticed a shadow or a movement. Taking a penknife from his pocket, one with special tool blades, he began to work on the lock of the door. The scraping of metal on metal seemed very loud, but he knew that it did not carry far.

For the second time that night his thoughts went back

in time—back to the days when he had been a beginner at picking locks, forcing windows, breaking into anything from a suburban house to a bank strong-room. Back to the days when he had learned his 'trade' with his heart beating like a trip-hammer. Then, not so far back, when he had become an expert of experts, so practised that he felt no fear, no pulsing blood, even though discovery seemed imminent. The remarkable thing was that all his skill and dexterity remained, that he had not hesitated for a moment to work on this door.

The lock clicked back, sharply, loudly. He stood close to the wall, listening intently, but there was no sound from within, and none from New Bond Street. He pushed open the door very slowly. There was not even a squeak. Beyond was a narrow staircase which, unlike the one at Quinns, led straight upwards to a lighted landing.

The key hung from a chain behind the door.

Mannering closed the door and locked it, then without hesitation started up the stairs. They were carpeted, and they creaked. He pressed against the wall so that he could tread close to it and so lessen the creaking; and for the rest of the way the only sound was the slight movement of his clothes as they slid against the wall.

He reached the landing.

There was an uncanny silence, which he did not understand.

Three doors led off the landing; one, slightly open, to a bathroom, the next to a room which must overlook Hart Row, the other the back of the shops on this side. At last, listening at the doorway of the room overlooking Hart Row, Mannering heard a rustle of sound. The door was ajar, not wide enough for him to squeeze inside but wide enough for him to look through.

He saw Belle Danizon, profile half-turned towards him, looking out of the window and he had no doubt that she was watching Quinns—watching for him. He smiled wryly to himself, and turned to the second room.

This door was also ajar, and wider open.

He judged from the position of it and the window beyond that in fact this also overlooked Hart Row as well as in the opposite direction. It was very long and narrow, obviously two small rooms knocked into one. He peered inside, and saw the man he had seen only once before, the man who had been at the Charity Ball with Belle and Bruce Danizon—Bernard Yenn. He was sitting in front of a small machine which looked like a miniature tape recorder, and he was whispering into it.

Mannering could not hear the words.

He strained his ears, but without success. Unless he could get nearer he would not be able to hear, and he was suddenly very anxious to do so, for Yenn was very intent on his task; what he was saying was obviously of great importance. Slowly, cautiously, Mannering pushed the door further open and inched into the room.

At last he could hear what Yenn was saying.

"*It will not harm you, you will be safe. When you see Mannering, kill him. If you do not kill him, he will kill you.*" There was a pause before he went on again in that intense whisper: "*It will not harm you, you will be safe. When you see Mannering, kill him. If you do not kill him, he will kill you.*"

He stopped, and for the first time sat back and relaxed, as if his task was now done. But his movement changed his position slightly, and suddenly he went tense again, his whole body stiffening.

Mannering knew that he had been seen.

15

GAUNTLET

"Don't move," Mannering said in a very soft voice. "Don't move an inch—and keep your hands on the table."

Yenn sat as if he were carved from stone. Sitting, he was a powerfully-built, thickset man, with bull-like shoulders and a short neck. His head was big; his hair, which was turning grey, wavy and attractive. He was both handsome and strong looking, with the kind of strength which would make him capable of heaving the table over and leaping at Mannering.

But had he the courage?

After a long pause, Mannering said: "Now play that tape back."

The man made no move.

"Play it back," Mannering ordered, only to see the shoulders hunch, the biceps swell beneath the shirt-sleeves. He was prepared for the bull-like rush that followed, the crash as the table went over and the tape-recorder fell, so prepared that he went forward at the same time, side stepped, and brought the hard side of his right hand mercilessly down on the thick neck. Yenn moved in a curious lurch, then crashed downward, head first. With part of his mind tuned in to sounds from the other room, Mannering heard a sudden gasp behind him, spun round towards the passage, and saw Belle Danizon standing on the threshold. She darted back to the room in which she had been sitting, but Mannering had a

foot in the door before she could close it.

As he bore down on her, she put up her hands as if to fend him off, but he slid one arm under her knees and the other round her waist, ignoring her attempts to push him away. Holding her so tightly that she had to fight for breath, he carried her into the other room, where Yenn was now struggling to pick himself up, and dumped her in an armchair.

"I don't want to hurt you, my dear, so don't try any tricks," he warned her.

Crossing to Yenn, wary in case he was pretending to be worse than he was, he yanked him to his feet and pushed him towards a bed on one side of the room. As the back of his knees struck the edge of the bed, Yenn dropped on to it.

"Stay there and don't move," Mannering ordered, and turned back towards Belle Danizon.

"No!" she gasped.

Without speaking, he pushed her chair against the bed so that he could see both her and Yenn at the same time, the chair back making it impossible for Yenn to get to his feet too quickly. Then he straightened the table and picked up the tape-recorder. It was identical with the one which had been left in his study, and the one left outside the window at Quinns. Sitting on a corner of the table, his prisoners facing him, he studied the machine, which was quite conventional and ran off a tiny dry cell battery. He wound the tape back on the spool, then played it.

The man's whispering voice sounded.

"When you see Mannering, kill him. If you do not kill him, he will kill you."

There was a pause, broken only by heavy breathing;

and then the voice sounded again, still whispering, baneful and insidious.

"When you see Mannering, kill him. If you do not kill him, he will kill you."

He listened to it several times, and was aware of two things. First, the way the man and the girl stared at him; second, the almost hypnotic effect of those whispered words, of the injunction to kill. Gradually, the intentness of the others increased. Yenn eased himself up on one elbow and peered towards Mannering, while Belle gripped the arms of her chair. The hypnotic effect seemed to grow and grow, and two words began to echo and echo in his mind.

"Kill Mannering ... Kill Mannering ... Kill Mannering..."

He began to realise something of the truth, and fought against the influence of that insidious, whispering voice. Once he realised its effect on him, resistance wasn't difficult, but he showed no sign of this, just stared down at the tiny tape-recorder.

"Kill Mannering ... If you do not kill him, he will kill you."

Yenn was getting very slowly off the bed, giving the impression that he had to avoid startling Mannering. Even when Mannering raised his eyes, Yenn continued to move. Now his feet were touching the floor; in a moment he would begin to move towards Mannering.

Belle eased herself up in her chair, too, and they were both standing.

The voice stopped as the tape ran out and there was intense silence. The other man stood still for a moment but soon began to move again. Mannering let him come halfway across the gap between them, then put his hand

to his jacket pocket. Yenn stopped abruptly. Mannering took out an automatic pistol.

"What have you got against Mannering?" he demanded.

The girl gasped. The man muttered: "If—if you put that gun away we can talk."

"We can talk whether I put it away or not," Mannering growled. "Go back to the bed and sit down."

Belle was muttering something to herself; it sounded like: "It didn't work, it didn't work." Yenn hesitated for a few seconds, then backed slowly towards the bed, sitting down obediently.

"What have you got against Mannering?" Mannering demanded, and then added in a bitter tone: "We might have something in common."

"Aren't you working *for* Mannering?" Yenn asked, as if he could not believe his ears.

"I'm working for myself," Mannering growled.

"Who—who are you?"

"Never mind who I am. I asked you why you've got it in for Mannering."

"He—he's breaking up my organisation. He—but you *know*. You took some of my disci—" Yenn broke off, but Mannering pretended not to notice the significance of the truncated word—"my assistants, to Quinns."

"You mean the Rocco girl, Esmeralda Devon and young Clawson?"

"Of course that's who I mean! You—you took them to Quinns. Didn't Mannering pay you to do that?"

"I did it for Mannering -yes."

"Then—then I don't understand you. I just don't understand." Yenn sounded baffled.

"Sometimes Mannering needs a strong-arm man who will do what he wants and ask no questions. I'm a strong-

arm man. It's not the first time I've worked for Mannering. His money is good and he asks no questions." Mannering managed to give the pause which followed a positively sinister significance before going on: "He doesn't tell me much, either. I know he wants to put paid to your account, but I don't know why."

"So you don't," breathed Yenn.

"Care to tell me?" Mannering asked.

"He—he knows I'm on to one of the biggest . . ." Yenn gulped, and broke off.

"One of the biggest—go on."

"He knows that I'm on to one of the biggest and easiest—" There was another awkward pause.

"Go on—say it. Racket?"

"I—I can make millions!"

"A lot of people *say* they can."

"I assure you that I can," Yenn insisted, and there was no doubt at all, he believed it. His manner was beginning to change, as if the effect of the shock was over and he was able to fight back.

And quite suddenly, he laughed.

Mannering was startled, for the laugh came so easily and naturally; it was not affected, as far as he could judge; something had struck Yenn as funny and the laughter came spontaneously. Mannering stiffened and raised the gun, as if the laugh disconcerted him. Belle, much more relaxed, was smiling as if she also believed that the worst was over.

"What's funny?" Mannering asked sharply.

"The situation is amusing," stated Yenn. "I have found a way in which one might say that I persuade collectors to steal from themselves—or at least to keep the theft in the family. I can get my hands on millions—tens of

millions of pounds worth of precious stones, I can be the most fabulous jewel-thief in all history." He laughed again and this time the laughter lasted longer and there was an almost hysterical note in it before he stopped. His expression changed, too—there was a glitter in the eyes buried beneath the jutting eyebrows. "I can be the richest collector in the world, I can own the crowns of a dozen kings and a dozen queens, I can—"

"Bernard!" Belle interrupted, sharply.

He looked startled, and glanced down at her.

"Eh? What did you say, my dear?" He frowned, and she glared back at him. "I—oh. Yes. Yes, I see." He drew a long, deep breath. "Now, what was I saying? Oh, yes. I can become both fabulously wealthy and win a great deal of power—authority, shall we say?"

"So where does Mannering come in?" demanded Mannering, intently.

The frown came back, and Yenn answered as if he could hardly believe the truth of what he was saying.

"Mannering is—is trying to stop me."

"How would he do that?" Mannering asked.

"I need the assistants, these young people, and Mannering has realised this and is keeping them away from me."

Mannering asked, almost casually: "How did he find out?"

Yenn did not answer, but Belle stirred.

"Don't you know who told him?" asked Mannering, more sharply.

"How well do *you* know him?" countered Yenn.

"I know him better than he knows himself."

"So you know how quick he is off the mark?"

"That's the truest thing you've said," agreed Manner-

ing, earnestly. "You don't have to say anything twice to Mannering and he doesn't let the grass grow under his feet."

"He could sell—" began Yenn, only to hesitate.

But he had told Mannering enough to suggest why he and Belle had started to work on him and on Quinns. This man believed he could steal an inexhaustible fortune in jewels and *objets d'art*, but it was one thing to have a stolen gem, another to sell it. But he took the remark literally.

"Sell anything, Mannering could," he agreed. "That man has more markets than anyone else in the world. He—" He broke off abruptly.

"Go on," urged Yenn.

"Oh, forget it."

"I don't want to forget it." Yenn was truculent again. "I want to learn all I can about Mannering, and if you know a great deal—"

"I've been doing work for Mannering for years, no questions asked," stated Mannering flatly. "I tell you I know him like the back of my hand."

"Where does he *sell*?" demanded Yenn.

"Everywhere—everywhere in the world. The millionaires and museums that man has on his books is unbelievable."

"Does he always sell openly?"

"I don't follow you," said Mannering, appearing to be genuinely puzzled.

"Does he always sell in the open or does he sell under cover?"

After a long pause, as if for consideration, Mannering said:

"You mean, does he sell to buyers who don't want the

world to know what they've got?"

"That's it exactly," said Yenn eagerly. "Does he sell under cover?"

"Half his business must be like that," said Mannering, looking at the other as if with sudden suspicion. "How much do you know about the business, mister?"

"Not so much that I couldn't know more," answered Yenn cunningly. "I want an outlet, you see. I want someone to sell for me, and I thought Mannering—"

So he *had* thought that he could pressure Mannering into allowing him to use Quinns as the distributor for stolen jewels. There was no longer any doubt about his motive, and none that he had thought it would be easy. He hadn't dreamt that Mannering would hit back so quickly—but then, what could have made him suspect it? If Bristow hadn't given him the names of the victims of the thefts he could have done very little. It was hardly surprising that Yenn was bewildered and had been dismayed.

"Did you put it to Mannering straight?" asked Mannering.

"I—no. No. I didn't. I thought if I softened him up a little—"

"He's a man who can't be softened up, but given the right terms he'll do a deal."

After a very long pause, during which Yenn and the girl exchanged quick, questioning glances, Yenn asked:

"Can *you* talk to Mannering?"

"Yes."

"Will you—"

"Tell me what you've got to sell, and I'll talk to him," Mannering said crisply. "But not for nothing. I want a cut."

"How—how much?" There was a glint of greed in Yenn's eyes.

"Ten per cent of any money that changes hands," Mannering said with a take-it-or-leave-it air. "What have you got to sell?"

"I've got—"

"Bernard!" the girl cried warningly.

"Plenty," Yenn finished, weakly. "I—" He broke off. "I'd want to know whether he would agree in principle before I'd say what I have to sell."

"But it's hot, is it?"

"Hot?"

"Recently stolen," Mannering explained patiently, and once again he began to marvel at the naïveté of this man.

"The goods are being acquired," Yenn said, carelessly. "They—" He broke off again, as if at a sudden thought. "Is Mannering really reliable?" he demanded.

"*I* think he's reliable," said Mannering flatly.

"Is he safe from the police?"

"The police don't bother him, he has a good reputation."

"Is that the *only* reason why they don't bother him?" demanded Yenn roughly. "Or has he got them in his pocket?" When Mannering made to answer he went on: "Hasn't he got Bristow where he wants him? That's what I want to know."

"Maybe he has," Mannering said cautiously. "Maybe he hasn't."

"Don't you *know*?"

"Mannering doesn't give much away."

"Well, he's got Bristow in his pocket," Yenn stated flatly, showing a swift return to assurance. "And Bris-

tow's in trouble. Bristow's been inquiring into certain little activities of mine, and he—"

Abruptly, Yenn stopped, and gave a snort of a laugh. The laughter grew louder and began to shake his heavy body, until he could not control himself and laughed and laughed until he quivered from head to foot. And slowly words came out of the sound of laughter.

"I've got Bristow fixed so that he'll *never* get away. Don't you ever forget it!"

That was the moment when Mannering realised that he wasn't dealing with a sane man.

16

THE FIX

Mannering thought, no, he's not sane.

And he thought: If he's got Bristow over a barrel, God help Bill Bristow.

And he thought: How am I going to find out what he means?

Slowly, the laughter died away, but the echo of it seemed to quiver about the walls of the room. The girl was looking at Yenn with a strange expression in her eyes, as if she disapproved of what he was saying; then she looked at Mannering.

"Would you help us against Mannering?" she asked levelly.

"Not if it's a question of killing."

"He won't be any use to us dead," she said coldly.

"That isn't what the tape said," Mannering pointed out.

There was silence—and in the silence came a wailing, a long way off; a police siren. Mannering did not give it a thought.

"The tape—the tape is a joke," Belle declared.

Some joke, thought Mannering, but he did not respond, and Yenn shifted uneasily.

"That's right," he agreed. "A joke. Mannering wouldn't be any use to us dead."

"So, will you help us?" asked Belle.

After a long pause, Mannering answered: "I might. I

told you what I'd want—a cut in any business. And—" He paused, and they waited as if breathlessly, while the wailing of a police siren grew louder and more urgent. "And I'd want some earnest money."

"How much?" asked Yenn sharply.

Mannering hesitated. If he asked for too much they would probably lose interest, if he asked for too little it would look suspicious. While he was deliberating the siren reached a baying bark and the sound of a car moving very fast came clearly. Next, the scream of tyres, and then beyond all doubt the car swung into Hart Row and pulled up just outside. In those last few seconds all three of them seemed to forget everything except the approaching car.

Then Yenn screamed: "The police!" He sprang towards the window. "It *is* the police!" He spun round towards Mannering. "You've brought them! You—"

"Don't be a fool," Mannering said roughly, and his heart was hammering. "I didn't bring them, if they catch me they could put me inside."

There were thudding footsteps outside and a hammering on the door which he had forced not long before. He could not imagine what had happened, he only knew that if the police held him for any reason then, under close scrutiny, they would almost certainly realise that he was disguised; and if they removed the disguise they would recognise him. Out of the blue disaster loomed. The hammering on the door grew louder and a man called out but they could not hear his words. Yenn was standing in the middle of the room, breathing harshly, his lips compressed, sweat beading his forehead and upper lip. Belle Danizon was by the chair, her eyes closed as if she were in a trance.

"What are we going to do?" muttered Yenn.

The man outside now spoke so loudly that they heard every word.

"Open the door, in the name of the law."

"My God, they'll break the door down," Yenn gasped. "What's brought them, what do they want? What—what shall we *do*?"

"If you don't let them in they *will* force the door," Mannering said.

There was the window, but the police would be watching, and even if he climbed up to the roof his chances of escape were negligible. He simply couldn't get away, and nor could the others, so there was only one thing for it: to face the police.

"I'll go," he said, and then threw up the window and bellowed: "I'm coming."

His heart was still hammering, he felt as near disaster as he had ever been in his life. Three policemen stood by the car, all looking upwards, and there were at least two by the shop door. The headlights of the car were on, turning Hart Row into a river of light.

He turned back, and said: "You two had better pull yourselves together."

He moved past them to the landing and went quickly down the stairs. Wild thoughts, such as thrusting past the men at the door and running for it, passed through his mind, but he put them aside. When he actually reached and opened the door, he felt much calmer.

Two uniformed men stared at him suspiciously, and then one said:

"Are you James Smith?"

"No," Mannering said.

"Who else is here?"

"There are two—two people upstairs."

The men pushed past him and two plainclothes men approached from the street. Mannering did the only thing he could; turned, and went back upstairs. The others had disappeared into the room where Yenn and Belle were by the time he reached the landing.

"What—what on earth are you doing?" demanded Yenn, and somehow he managed to sound outraged. "You you frightened the life out of me."

"We are police officers, sir, and we have a search warrant. Are you James Smith?"

"Indeed I am not! I am Bernard Yenn. And this young lady is the daughter of Sir—"

"If you'll just stay where you are, sir." The two plain clothes men came out, saw but took no notice of Mannering, and went into the other rooms, spending only time enough in each to check whether anyone else was in there. One, tall and lean, turned to the other: "Well, he's not here."

"Who isn't here?" Yenn rapped out.

"We had information that a James Smith was here," the policeman said, and he took a photograph out of his pocket. "Do you know this man?" he asked Mannering.

Mannering looked at the likeness of a thin-lipped man in his early twenties and felt a swift flash of recognition; then, on looking more closely, he realised he had never seen this man before.

He shook his head.

"Do you, sir?" The officer turned to Yenn, who glanced quickly down at the photograph and immediately said:

"Certainly not. I've never seen him in my life."

"You, Miss?" The officer showed the picture to Belle. She too glanced at it quickly, and her voice when she spoke sounded over-loud.

"I don't know the man. I've never seen him."

Were they lying? Mannering wondered. He suspected that they were. Both had sounded far too definite; both had looked at the photograph far too briefly to be so certain.

"Who—who *is* this James Smith?" Yenn demanded.

The officer said gruffly: "He is the owner, and believed to be the driver, of a motor-car involved in a hit and run accident in Hart Row this afternoon. We understand that he was here earlier today."

"I do assure you that I do *not* know him," Yenn said. "I was not here this afternoon, but there *was* a meeting of young people. I am very interested in the carpet business and permit the premises to be used for lectures. This afternoon there was, I believe, a lecture on the Indian states in which the best carpets are made, but I myself was at Sir Richard Danizon's house in Lamb Lane. You can corroborate that, can't you, Belle? Miss Danizon is the daughter of . . ." he went on in a curious mixture of humility and arrogance, until the lean officer said:

"Thank you, sir." He turned to Mannering. "Were you here this afternoon?"

"Indeed not," said Mannering. "I came to see Mr. Yenn on business."

"May I ask what business, sir?"

"I hoped to take on an agency for these carpets for the Midlands," answered Mannering earnestly.

The lean detective said: "I see," and glanced at Yenn who nodded almost impatiently.

"Yes. Yes. But I haven't time to go into that now. Monday. Come and see me on Monday." He began to move about, as if very agitated. "Must *I* stay, officer? Can you do all you need if I leave?"

"Are there any records of the meeting up here, sir?"

"No, no, everything will be downstairs in the office. I simply allow the use of the rooms, as the tenant. If you wish to get in touch with the tenant of the shop, or the landlord—"

"We know who they are, sir, thank you." The tall lean officer glanced about him and then went out. He was joined by other members of the police. There was an air of disappointment about them all, as if they had really expected to find the M.G. owner. The raid was over, fading out like a damp squib after a succession of lively fireworks. "Goodnight." They all went down stairs, quiet in their dejection, and soon the door was closed.

As it closed, Yenn muttered with a greater viciousness than he had yet shown:

"I'll get Bristow for this. My God, I'll get Bristow!"

"What's Bristow got to do with it?" demanded Mannering.

"He should have kept them away. I warned him that if there was any trouble I'd break him as if he were made of matchwood." Yenn held both hands in front of him, gripping an imaginary stick, and broke it across his knee.

"But how can—?" began Mannering.

"He's been taking money to keep his mouth shut, hasn't he? And I can prove it. Can't I, Belle, I can prove it." He glared at Mannering. "I'll break Bristow *and* I'll break Mannering if he doesn't do what I want. Understand? You tell him! Tell him he's going to represent me in selling everything I've got to sell, or else—"

He repeated the same brutal movements of destruction he had used when speaking of Bristow, and Mannering felt a sudden twinge almost of fear.

"I'll tell him," he muttered. "Where do I get in touch

with you?"

"The Danizons' place in Lamb Lane—where else?" demanded Yenn. "Monday—no later than Monday. I won't wait later than Monday!"

Mannering said: "I'll see what I can do."

He turned and went out of the room, expecting to be stopped, expecting the man to ask who he was and why he had broken in, but Yenn was standing absolutely still, his eyes glazed, his hands clenched, while Belle Danizon watched him, frowning.

Mannering went out into the street. It was good to feel the fresh air on his face. As he walked along Hart Row to the New Bond Street end, he could not get Yenn's viciousness out of his mind. Two policemen were in sight, and he suspected that other men, loitering near, were plainclothes police. He walked, not slowly yet not fast, towards Piccadilly, and soon he was quite sure that he was being followed.

So the police had not been as easily satisfied as they had seemed.

They were not actually after him, he would have no difficulty in escaping, but the fact that he was followed brought both a sense of excitement and a chill. If they had the slightest suspicion who he was—

He turned towards Piccadilly Circus, the lights blazing down on the milling crowds and massed traffic.

Hurrying towards the nearest steps to the subway, he allowed himself to be followed to the next exit, then, as a crowd of youths came past, he suddenly doubled back and went up the stairs he had come down. The plainclothes man was cut off by the youths, and had no chance to catch up. Mannering reached the Circus again, hurried along a narrow street, then into Shaftesbury

Avenue, where the lights of a dozen theatres blazed.

A taxi came along, its sign lighted. Mannering got in and gave the driver his address, then took a small mirror and a bottle of white spirit from his pocket, and spent the journey removing all traces of his disguise, so that the police watching his flat would recognise him as Mannering.

It was a quarter to eleven when the taxi pulled up outside his flat. A plainclothes man appeared out of a doorway, watching him, and Mannering said quickly:

"Have you been looking after my wife for me?"

"Oh, Mr. Mannering. Yes, sir. No more trouble, I'm glad to say."

"Good," said Mannering. "And thanks. Are you staying on duty?"

"Not me, sir, I'm just off, but there'll be a couple of men here until tomorrow at least."

"Very reassuring," Mannering said. "Goodnight."

When he reached the front door of the flat, he had a strange feeling that everything was not as trouble-free as the man in the street had said. He gave a knock and a ring and a double knock, a code to tell Lorna who it was, and then put the key in the lock, holding his breath, touched by the fear of finding trouble.

But Lorna came, eagerly.

"Oh, darling," she exclaimed, "it's good to see you safely back." She hugged him with a strength which told him how anxious she had been, and held him by the hand as they went into the study, which was virtually the living-room. "Did you have enough to eat? ... Would you like something? ... Tea or coffee or brandy? Oh, darling!" she said again. "It's good to see you safely home."

He had never known her more relieved.

She made coffee and cut some sandwiches, sat on the pouffe and leaned against Mannering's knee. He told her what had happened, and could hardly believe it himself. The contrast between the tense, artificial melodramatic atmosphere at the flat above the carpet shop and this warm, homely, affectionate companionship was almost unbelievable. Lorna spoke now and again in a gentle voice: he wondered whether she had fully understood the deepest implications of all he had said.

"John."

"Yes?"

"Do you really think that Yenn can harm Bill Bristow?"

"Yes," Mannering said. "Yes." After a pause he went on: "It's too late to do anything tonight, though. I'll be able to think more clearly in the morning."

"Then let's go to bed," she said, and stifled a yawn.

Soon, they were in bed and asleep. The night was quiet. There were few movements in the street, and those mostly of two watching policemen.

. . .

In the strong room at Quinns, the prisoners slept. Above, Larraby dozed, fitfully. Next to his wife in the big double bed in the Putney flat, Bristow lay awake, wondering whether he had been wise to ask Mannering for help.

It was after four o'clock when the telephone bell rang next to his bed, and he started up and snatched off the receiver. His wife stirred.

"Bristow," he said in an urgent whisper.

"I want to see you," Yenn said in a venomous voice. "I want to see you *now*."

17

THE ULTIMATUM

"Who—who is that?" Bristow demanded, as if he were hardly awake.

"You know damned well who it is! I want to see you at Sir Richard Danizon's place in Lamb Street—right now."

"Do you realise it's four o'clock in the morning?"

"You don't have to tell me the time. Get out of bed and come and see me—*now*."

Bristow's wife stirred, and then went still. He knew she was awake and was listening; and had no doubt she realised how badly he was worried. He could hear Yenn's heavy breathing, the breathing of a man who was beside himself with rage, and was ready for another outburst.

"Bristow, if you don't get your carcase off that bed—"

"Be quiet!" Bristow said sharply, and the momentary assertion of authority obviously startled the caller, who fell silent.

"I'll see you at seven o'clock," Bristow said at last.

"I said *now*!"

"I'll see you at my office at Scotland Yard at seven o'clock," Bristow insisted. He knew the other would not come to the Yard, and he would have to give way eventually, but if he gave way all along the line he would be utterly defenceless. At the back of his mind there was the thought that before seven o'clock he could talk to Mannering.

"Are you crazy?" cried Yenn. "I'm not coming to Scotland Yard. You come here, or—"

"Oh, all right, I'll come to you," Bristow said. "Seven o'clock, no earlier."

He put down the receiver before the other could speak again; and eased himself down in bed. The night was chilly and his shoulders and the tops of his arms were cold. He wondered whether his wife would let him know she was awake, whether she would ask the questions which he could never answer. But she did not. He felt less tense, now, than he had all night. Warm, comfortable, no longer on edge.

For the first time that night, he fell asleep, telling himself that he might as well get up, that he would have to be up by six in order to get to the house in Lamb Street by seven o'clock.

He slept, soundly, oblivious to the passing of time.

And Yenn waited, restlessly, only two miles away.

. . .

"Will," Mrs. Bristow whispered. "Will, wake up."

Bristow grunted and stirred and wished her a thousand miles away.

"Will, it's nearly half-past six. *Will.*"

Half-past six. Half past six. My God! Six! Bristow jerked up as if stung, catching his wife on the chin with his head, making her teeth snap. He had to be two miles away by seven o'clock, and it was half past six. He flung back the bedclothes as his wife said with calm reassurance:

"The kettle's on, dear. I heard you say you would be

somewhere at seven o'clock, so I thought I'd better call you."

"I—I'm glad you did. Thanks."

It did not dawn on Bristow that at this moment he was behaving almost as if his wife of over thirty years was virtually a stranger; that in his endeavour to protect her from worry, he was cutting her off from sharing a vital part in his life. He was in and out of the bathroom in ten minutes, and she brought in tea as he began to dress.

"Will—"

"Not now, dear. I—I'm in a hurry."

"Will," she said. "You ought to know what I've done. I hope—I hope you won't be upset."

He slipped on his jacket, looking at her almost as if he were seeing her for the first time. And in a way he was. She was nearly sixty, and her hair was grey, but she was as attractive to him now, as she had always been; and her eyes, so beautiful when she had been young, were still beautiful, despite the lines at the corners.

"What have you done?" he asked gently.

"I've told John Mannering that you need help."

"You've told—Good *God!*"

"Will, I couldn't go on doing nothing and seeing you so worried. I know you've kept something away from me to try to make sure I wasn't hurt, but—" She broke off, hands stretching out towards him in rare appeal. "I just had to do something. He's on his way here. I said you wouldn't be gone until a quarter to seven. He should be here at any moment. I—I feel sure you can trust him, I really do."

She was searching his face for an indication of his reaction, and obviously the last thing she expected was the way he dropped on to the side of the bed and stared

up at her, astonished at first but gradually beginning to smile.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I can trust him. What a bloody fool I was not to realise I could trust you, too."

"Oh—Will!"

He said gruffly: "I've got to go. We'll talk later. And I'm very glad you've sent for Mannering. You couldn't have done a better thing."

There were tears of relief in her eyes as she poured out tea. The teapot was still in her hand when the front door bell rang. She put it down quickly. Bristow, looping his tie round his neck, saw for the first time that there were three cups.

He heard his wife say: "He's nearly ready. You'll be able to talk in the car, won't you, there's no need to waste time on explanations now." She pushed the bedroom door wider open. "Will dear, here's Mr. Mannering. You will have a cup of tea, Mr. Mannering, won't you?"

. . .

In the car, Mannering's car, Bristow said briskly: "I'm going to be late."

"It won't do Yenn any harm to be kept waiting, Bill."

"John," Bristow said, "he's a very vicious man."

"I've discovered that," Mannering replied, "but with luck he won't be able to be vicious for much longer. What makes it possible for him to order you to go to see him, Bill?"

"I know I should have told you," Bristow said. "He has a tape-recording of a conversation I had with Frewin and with the others."

"Well?"

"If he plays it back to the Commissioner—" Bristow broke off, dropped his hands on his knees, and as Mannering drove through the nearly empty streets, he stared straight ahead and said: "I'll be finished, John. There isn't any doubt about that—I'll be finished."

His fingers were unsteady as he took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one from the end that was already between his lips. He glanced at Mannering, but Mannering was intent on the road; his profile looked very set and stern. He turned a corner into Kensington High Street as a clock hanging outside one of the big stores showed exactly seven o'clock.

. . .

Mannering noticed the time.

He did not look at Bristow; he had trained himself too thoroughly never to look at a passenger while he was driving, but he was strongly tempted to pull up, because he wanted to look Bristow straight in the eyes. The tone of the other's voice, his manner since they had left the apartment, and the way he said he would be finished because of a tape-recording of what he had said to the victims of robbery, all pointed to one thing: that this man, whom he so liked and trusted, *had* accepted bribes from one or all of the five victims.

"Bill," he said gently, "what did you say that could possibly be so damning?"

Bristow answered grimly: "You know Yenn by now. He's an absolute master at tape-recordings. He took a recording of each of the interviews—he must have had a miniature recorder planted by these youngsters who do whatever he tells them. Afterwards, he edited the tapes—

a very clever, beautiful piece of editing. Then he had a fresh recording made of the edited version so that there's no sign of a cut. It sounds like a straightforward recording." Bristow glanced at Mannering again. "Isn't it simple?"

"Very simple," Mannering said, hoping that his relief didn't sound in his voice. "But it would never stand up as evidence."

"It wouldn't be used in evidence," said Bristow. "It would simply be used to force my dismissal from the Force. I haven't any doubt how effective it would be. Or will be, I should say. You haven't made any progress, have you?" Obviously he had no hope at all.

"Just a little," Mannering said cautiously. "I gathered from him that he expected you to give him protection."

"You've got that far?" Bristow was startled. "He told me that I had to keep the police away from him. I told him (a) it wouldn't be possible and (b) that in any case I wouldn't try. There are times when he simply doesn't seem to listen, still less understand," Bristow went on, helplessly. "He says a thing, gives what amounts to an order and then seems to take it for granted that it will be obeyed and behaves like a madman if it isn't. In the few weeks I've known this man I seem to have been driven out of my mind."

"His speciality is driving people crazy," Mannering said drily. "Do you know what he wants this morning?"

"I haven't the faintest idea." Bristow laughed bitterly. "Can you imagine me coming if I *weren't* out of my mind?"

"I can imagine almost anything with this particular man," replied Mannering. "Bill—find out what he wants. I have an idea he'll ask for incriminating evidence against

me." He took one hand off the wheel and rested it lightly on Bristow's arm. "When you know what he's after, tell him you'll give your answer at Quinns—nowhere else. Make an appointment with him at Quinns and let me know what time it is. Will you do that? If it's today—not earlier than five o'clock this afternoon, though."

Bristow nodded.

Ten minutes later he got out of the car at the end of Lamb Street and walked with his usual briskness towards the big house, which stood, an oasis of the past, in the heart of London.

. . .

Yenn towered over and glowered at Bristow.

"You're late," he rasped.

"I came as soon as I could," Bristow said stonily.

"Very well, this time I will overlook it. Why did you allow the police to raid the flat in Hart Row last night?"

Still in a stony voice, Bristow replied: "I didn't know there was a raid."

"You should have known."

"Why waste time discussing what happened?" Bristow asked, wearily. "What do you want now?"

"You know I can ruin you, don't you?"

"I know exactly what you can do," Bristow agreed.

"I repeat, I will overlook what has happened so far on one condition," said Yenn. "That is, that you do exactly what I tell you now."

Bristow studied him, almost unable to believe the arrogance of his manner, his absolute assumption of dominance. It did not seem to occur to him to doubt that he would be obeyed, and there was something uncanny in

the way he looked at Bristow from beneath those jutting eyebrows.

"What do you want?" Bristow demanded.

"I want evidence against John Mannering of the shop Quinns," stated Yenn flatly. "He is a criminal, of course. You must have a lot of evidence against him. I want it."

Bristow didn't respond.

"You hear me?" Yenn rapped. "I want all the evidence you have against Mannering."

"So you do," Bristow said, and he closed his eyes, partly because they felt so heavy, partly because he did not want this man to see the expression in them. "Mannering is an old friend of mine. He—"

"An old accomplice, you mean!"

Bristow said heavily, as if painfully: "There's only one place you can get evidence against Mannering."

"Where?" Yenn loomed over him. "Tell me where, at once!"

"At Quinns," Bristow said flatly.

"At Quinns? At his shop? Are you *mad*?"

"If you want evidence against Mannering you can get it at Quinns," Bristow repeated. "I have to be—"

"Yes, go on! Tell me!"

"I have to be there at five o'clock this afternoon," Bristow said.

"To-*day*? Sunday?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand you. You must be lying to me!"

"Please yourself," Bristow said, tautly. "I shall be there at five o'clock, and if you're there you'll get what you want."

"You mean—*Mannering* is blackmailing you?"

"I mean I'm sick and tired of you, of him, of everything that's happened this last few weeks," Bristow said in a tone of repressed anger. "I've told you how you can get evidence against Mannering—don't blame me if you throw your chance away."

He turned on his heel, and as he did so, saw Belle Danizon, sitting in a chair in a corner of the room. He would not have noticed her had she not leaned forward to see him.

"Bristow!" cried Yenn, and he strode after Bristow into the lovely hall, with the portraits of men and women staring down at the puppets of the present. "You be there—understand? You be there. I've got to have Mannering where I want him, he—well never mind. You be there!"

"I'll be there," Bristow said, heavily.

. . .

On the telephone, he said to Mannering: "So that was the outcome of it, John. He'll be at Quinns at five o'clock. Are you sure it will serve any purpose?"

"Yes," Mannering said. "But I don't think you should be there as well, Bill. Be outside when he arrives, and then go off."

"John, what are you up to?"

"Getting the last laugh on Bernard Yenn," Mannering answered briskly.

"John," Bristow said uneasily, "I'm not sure you can. I'm not sure that he isn't a lot cleverer than you realise. For heaven's sake, be careful!"

"Never more so," Mannering promised. "Goodbye, Bill." He replaced the receiver and then turned to see

Lorna by his side, in her eyes exactly the same plea that Bristow had uttered.

Be careful, her eyes seemed to say. Be very careful, John.

18

THE RENDEZVOUS

As Mannering put down the receiver he looked at Lorna, patted her shoulder, and said: "You worry too much." But as he went into the study he wasn't so sure. There was something about Yenn, about the whole business, that he didn't understand. For one thing, it was almost inconceivable that Yenn himself was capable of organising everything that had been done.

Who else was involved?

Sitting at his desk, Mannering checked the addresses of the other two young people involved: Frank Bennett and Charles Clawson Junior. Then he typed two brief notes, each saying exactly the same thing:

> Please be at Quinns in Hart Row at four o'clock this afternoon. The matter is urgent. B.Y.

Would they believe Bernard Yenn had written them? he wondered. There was just a chance, and the peremptory wording was characteristic of the man as he knew him. He telephoned Aristide's flat, and Aristide answered promptly enough for Mannering to be sure that he had been up for some time.

"I'd like you to be at Quinns at four o'clock, for a special job," Mannering said. "Can you make it?"

"I'll be very glad to," Aristide said, with apparent feeling. "I've polished every piece of silver in the place

and—I mean, I'm bored stiff."

"I don't think you will be, for long," Mannering said. "Aristide—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Were you at a meeting over Pandit's—the carpet shop opposite Quinns—yesterday afternoon?"

Aristide caught his breath.

"How on earth did you know about that?"

"Were you there?" insisted Mannering.

"No," Aristide said. "But my brother James was."

"Your brother?" Mannering was startled into echoing the words. James Smith, he thought, James Smith ... No wonder the face in that photograph had seemed familiar!

"Yes. He and a few others play around with yoga and —well, I used to, but I got sick of it, sir. There was something about this particular group I didn't care for. How did *you* come to know about the meeting?"

"I'll tell you later," Mannering said.

It was then half-past eleven, and Lorna was preparing lunch, as she liked to do on Sunday when the daily maid didn't come in. When Mannering looked in the kitchen, she wore a flowered apron which had a bib fastened round the neck, and was chopping mint. He went across and slid his arms round her waist, linking his hands in front of her.

"Look," he remarked, showing the gap between her waist and his hands, "you're wasting away. What time is lunch?"

"Half-past one."

"I'm going over to the shop to have a word with Josh. I'll be back in good time."

"You will, won't you?" she urged.

"Promise."

He hugged her, and went out, whistling, but the whistling stopped when he reached the lift. His Allard was parked outside, and so was a police car, with two men in it. They exchanged 'Good mornings' and he drove off. He delivered the notes, one in Mayfair and the other at Knightsbridge, then drove to Quinns.

No one was watching here, as far as he could see.

He gave the usual signal at Larraby's door before turning the key. The silence as he went inside seemed so complete that he was seized by a sudden fear, but as he started up the stairs, Larraby appeared at the top.

"Good morning, sir. I'm afraid I was dozing."

"Good for you," remarked Mannering, lightly. "Didn't you sleep well?"

"Not too soundly, but then one doesn't as one gets older. Is all well with you and the situation?"

"I think so," said Mannering. "I'll be bringing the other two in soon after four o'clock, all being well, and with any luck we'll have the climax soon after five."

"You really think it's as near as that?" asked Larraby.

"I certainly hope so," said Mannering drily. "I wouldn't like to keep this pressure up much longer. I think I ought to check that they're all right in the strong room."

"I'm sure they are, sir," said Larraby. "I took some breakfast down and put it in the outer room, then came back, and slid the first door open. When I went down again an hour later the food had gone."

"Let's give them some morning newspapers," suggested Mannering, "and try the same thing."

Twenty minutes later the newspapers had gone, too.

"They're taking it all very calmly, sir," Larraby remarked.

"I don't see how they could do much else," Mannering

reasoned. "All right, Josh. I'll be back by half past three."

. . .

At the flat, he carved a small shoulder of lamb with long practised skill, and enjoyed luncheon with green peas, roasted potatoes, and home-prepared mint sauce. There was the same air of normality as there had been last night, and even Lorna seemed to have lost her worst fears.

"What have you got to do when I've gone?" asked Mannering.

"I'm going up to the studio," she said.

She always worked whenever she felt there was any cause to worry, but she made no particular comment. He left the house, waved to the policemen on duty, and drove to Quinns, arriving at twenty-five minutes to four. By five to four he was at Larraby's Hart Row window, and at one minute to the hour a Morris Minor turned the corner and pulled up outside Quinns. He went downstairs, through the shop, and opened the main door. Two young men, one tall, thin and bearded, the other shorter and clean-shaven, got out, looking at him in puzzlement.

"Mr. Yenn asked us to come," said the young man with the beard. He was Charles Clawson Junior.

"He'll be here in a few minutes," said Mannering. "There will be a special meeting downstairs. The others are already here—would you care to join them?"

The young man nodded.

Larraby was already in the office, and the outer exit of the strong-room was open. Mannering watched as the two youths went down the short flight of steps ahead of him without showing the slightest apprehension; obvi-

ously they were used to doing whatever Yenn told them to do.

"Mr. Yenn will be here soon," Mannering said, and went back up the stairs; for the first time he glimpsed alarm on their faces, as they turned to see the door slide back into place. If Mannering had a regret, it was that he could not see the others when the first sliding wall partition opened and they confronted one another. He did not trouble to push the armchair and carpet back again, for Bristow and Yenn would be here within the hour.

"It has gone with such remarkable smoothness, sir," Larraby remarked, "that it's hard to believe there won't be trouble before it's over."

"That's how my wife feels," Mannering said. "When things go badly we expect it, when they go well, we're astounded. Most human beings are natural pessimists in this wicked world. Short of the police arriving in strength and finding that I've shut half-a-dozen people up against their will, I can't see anything that *can* go wrong. Have you seen any sign of the police?"

"Absolutely none, sir."

"They may be watching from a distance," Mannering said. "And they can certainly move pretty fast." He chuckled. "Here am I, joining the ranks of the dismal jerries. Don't you accept the possibility that everything could go right for once?"

"Oh, I accept the *possibility*, sir," replied Larraby, with glum emphasis.

They both laughed.

"Josh, you haven't been out all day," said Mannering. "Go for a stroll, and keep your eyes open for police as you go."

"I shall enjoy that," said Larraby, heading for the door

immediately. "I will be back in half-an-hour, sir."

Mannering went to the window and watched the old man walking along quite briskly, shoulders square, near-white hair blowing slightly in the breeze, looking about him with the delight of a young boy. Yet he would observe with instinctive thoroughness. No one would be more certain than he to find out if the police were watching Quinns.

If they were, then they may have been tipped off, or, as likely, been alerted by Mannering himself and the comings and goings at Hart Row and the known trouble at the Green Street flat. And they could close in at a moment's notice giving no warning at all. Mannering suddenly felt more uneasy than he had expected. He had, after all, kidnapped the young people in the strong-room, and kidnapping was a major offence.

He began to be anxious for Larraby's return.

. . .

Larraby turned into New Bond Street, and paused at a tobacconist's window, the most reasonable place for an elderly man to pause. It enabled him to look up and down in each direction, and the first glance, towards Oxford Street, troubled him.

Two policemen were standing by a car in which another man sat; and they were laughing and joking—as they might be if they were all policemen. Larraby did not linger, but walked in the other direction. Very soon he saw a ladder up against the wall of a shop a few doors along. A workman was climbing off the ladder on to a roof. Any workmen busy in this part of London on a Sunday were rare, although if there had been heavy rain

and a leaking roof, it would be understandable.

It had hardly rained all this week.

Larraby glanced down a side street, the one into which Mannering had climbed the previous night; there was a car parked along it, and the man at the wheel was looking upwards. Suddenly, he waved his hand, and Larraby needed no telling that he was a policeman watching a colleague on the roof. That roof was only a few yards away from Quinns.

Larraby walked on as if noticing nothing; then saw two more men at a telephone manhole. Telephone repairs were often carried out on Sunday, but this was too much for coincidence. So was a newspaper seller in a doorway which was not usually used for news-vending.

There was no shadow of doubt in Larraby's mind that Quinns was being closely watched; that a strong police cordon surrounded it.

Quickening his pace, Larraby reached Savile Row and walked round the narrow streets towards the other end of New Bond Street, and now, as he drew within reach of Quinns, he saw other men, two of them whom he recognised as Divisional police officers. He changed direction again, as if casually, and as soon as he was out of sight of the police, stepped into a telephone booth. He had been away for twenty minutes and it was a little after half-past four.

Mannering answered almost at once.

"John Mannering speaking.'

"This is Larraby, sir," Larraby said quietly. "I am afraid there is no doubt at all -the police are in strength around Hart Row. I doubt if I have ever seen a stronger concentration. There must be at least twenty men on the watch, sir, from the roof as well as the street.

Is there *any*thing I can do, sir?"

"Just come back," Mannering said after a pause. "But don't show any alarm, and don't show that you've recognised the police."

"I'll be with you in a few minutes, sir," Larraby promised.

. . .

Mannering put down the receiver very slowly, staring at a Dutch panel of three priests at a table, the colours subdued and yet beautiful against the lighter panelled wall. Larraby's: "I'll be with you in a few minutes, sir," echoed in his ears. So did everything the old man had said, and Mannering could see the picture with vivid clarity. At least twenty men—and the Yard would not concentrate such a force unless they had strong reason to suspect serious crime.

Could they know about his prisoners in the strong-room? And if so, who could have told them? No one knew about the kidnappings except Larraby, Lorna and himself...

No, there were others. Yenn had seen some of his 'assistants' come up and be hustled inside, and might well suspect they were being held prisoner. Yenn, and Belle Danizon, and anyone whom they had told.

But who *would* they have told?

"No one," Mannering muttered to himself. "No one." He took out his notebook and ran through it for Gordon's private address and dialled the number. The ring ing went on for so long that he thought there would be no answer, but at last the sound stopped and a woman spoke, breathlessly.

"This is—Mrs. Gordon." Her breathing was very heavy, reminding him, absurdly, of Yenn's.

"Is Superintendent Gordon in, please?"

"No," the woman answered breathlessly. "He is—out of town."

"Out of town?" echoed Mannering, and one of his greatest hopes faded into thin air. Even if Gordon hadn't been able to call off the watch, he could have told Mannering what was behind it.

"He—he was sent on a special assignment," Mrs. Gordon added, breathing more freely. "I don't think it is—confidential. Who—who is that, please?"

"John Mannering," Mannering said.

"Oh, Mr. Mannering! How nice to speak to you. My husband tried to call you before he went away, but couldn't get through and he had such little time. He's been sent to Norfolk, the Norfolk police wanted some assistance. It's such a nuisance when he has to go out at such short notice."

"A thorough nuisance," agreed Mannering. "Well, thank you."

"I'm glad I heard the telephone—I was gardening, it's been such a lovely day. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Mannering said, and rang off.

His nerves felt very brittle.

Gordon had been sent away deliberately, of course; could he doubt that it was because he was known to be well disposed towards Mannering? Someone else at the Yard must have realised or guessed he had asked Mannering to help Bristow, must have told the hierarchy at the Yard.

It was a long time since danger had crowded so close upon him, and Mannering put the receiver down and

stood very still. As he did so, there was a knock at the back door, a code knock giving reassurance. He went down, expecting to see Josh Larraby.

Instead, he opened the door to Aristide Smith and Belle Danizon.

19

THE CONSPIRATORS

Mannering stood aside, and Aristide and Belle entered.

In the year or two that Mannering had known him, Aristide had always been a rather diffident young man, not at all sure of himself, but now he had an assurance —a confidence—which could not be mistaken. He looked Mannering straight in the eye. So did Belle, who was holding Aristide's arm in the way peculiar to women who want to make sure that others know they will brook no competition.

Mannering closed the door.

"Mr. Mannering," said Aristide. "You have twenty minutes at most to make up your mind whether you want to spend the next few years in prison, or whether to make yourself millions of pounds more than you have."

"Oh," murmured Mannering. "Is that so, Aristide?"

"Sarcasm won't affect me," Aristide said shortly, "and there's no point in holding an inquest. You made the mistake a lot of middle-aged men make: you thought that because I'm young, I'm a fool—and inferior to you. I am not. I have tooled you completely. Ever since I came to work for you I have been planning this." He was now moving towards Mannering's office, and instead of standing aside and deferring to Mannering, he went in first, took a swift, arrogantly possessive look round, and looked superciliously at the portrait of Mannering as a cavalier.

Mannering slipped behind the desk and into his chair.

"Do sit down, Miss Danizon," he said.

"Not Miss Danizon—my wife, Mrs. Smith," corrected Aristide; and as Mannering tried to digest that piece of information Belle sat down in the chair opposite him. He had seldom seen anyone so radiant; if he had to judge, he would say that she was a very happy young woman.

"Congratulations," Mannering murmured.

"A little overdue," said Aristide, "but never mind. And now let me tell you one or two things that should help you make your decision. Bernard Yenn has believed for a year that he was using me and my friends. He has acquired a certain facility in tele hypnosis, with the help of a tape-recorder and his curiously pitched voice. But although a lot of people fall for that, most don't. He *thinks* his disciples, as he calls them, obey his instructions because of his hypnotic powers. In fact, they obey because I tell them to do so. *I* give them instructions, Mannering. Yenn is a useful cover—if we'd ever run into trouble we could always have pleaded that we were under the influence of Bernard and his phoney yoga-hypnotism."

"How very ingenious," Mannering applauded.

He was beginning to recover from the shock, but he felt far from easy. There was such confidence in this young man, such certainty; and so far Mannering could not see even a glimmer of hope.

"Not so ingenious as some of the other things we've done," Aristide said proudly. "Each of us is from a wealthy family, Mannering. Each of us is sick to death of being told what to do by parents who belong to yesterday. And so we—or rather Belle and I—worked out a scheme to take some of the family jewels, which we would inherit some day in any case, turn them into big money,

and take our turn at being top dog. And the scheme proved a very good one—the potential became larger and larger all the time. Now, thanks to an edited tape, we have Bristow where we want him; Bristow will do what he's told, and he still has a lot of power as a policeman."

"He's had a remarkably fine career," murmured Mannering.

"And if he's sensible he can go out in a blaze of glory," said Aristide. "If he isn't, he'll live in the shadows for the rest of his life."

"What do you want him for?" asked Mannering. For the first time since the shock of this revelation he felt the stirring of anger, a glow which began to spread throughout his body.

"You can't even think beyond the end of your nose," said Aristide, glancing at Belle as if to say: "You see how much cleverer I am than Mannering." "Bristow knows more about private jewel collections, and the safety precautions taken for them, than any man living. *He's* going to help us take whatever we want, and *you're* going to sell it for us. And you'll both get a cut—ten per cent of the proceeds for each of you. You see how generous I am?"

"Very generous," murmured Mannering. "And do I take it that your wife's visit to Quinns and Bruce Danizon's telephone call were stages in my—er—take-over?"

"You're damned right, you can. And don't think it wasn't easy. I thought you might catch on when you caught me at your flat—I'd just fixed the tape recorder, but you came back too soon. That was a pretty good act I put on," said Aristide proudly. "And you were too damned blind to see through it."

"Not blind," Mannering said heavily. "Just reluctant to think I was being cheated by a man I trusted. Tell me—why did your brother kill Annabel Kitt? It was your brother, wasn't it?"

Aristide nodded. "She learned too much about us," he said grimly. "Once she came and started direct negotiations with you, she—"

"And how long do you think you can keep up this particular scheme?" interrupted Mannering, struggling to stifle the blind fury he felt rising within him. His only hope lay in keeping his temper, he told himself, and he could not keep his temper so long as he thought of Annabel.

"For as long as it takes to make us all very rich," replied Aristide.

"I see. Don't you think you might have overlooked—"

"Don't talk to me like that!" rasped Aristide. "You've looked down your nose at me far too often. You've got fifteen minutes left. At five o'clock, Bernard Yenn will be here, and Bristow. As soon as they come the police will raid the place, and do you know what they'll find? All over Quinns they'll find stolen gems. Pieces *I* planted very cleverly and skilfully. Pieces that will prove *you* bought the jewels stolen from all five of the parents. Once the police get in here, Mannering, they'll have a field day. They'll go off with you and Bristow in the same Black Maria. Oh yes, I've incriminated him as well. You haven't a chance, not a chance in hell—*unless*—"

He left the threat hanging.

Mannering leaned back in his chair, his manner calm and relaxed. No one could guess at the rage which now surged inside him: at the almost irresistible impulse he felt to spring up and put his hands round Aristide's thin,

smooth neck.

Belle Danizon looked almost disappointed.

"You don't seem at all shocked, Mr. Mannering."

"Don't I, Mrs. Smith?" Mannering smiled. "And how can I escape this fate in—" he glanced at his watch—"twelve and a half minutes, at most?"

"That's easy," Aristide said. "You have an ex-thief as a manager, and leopards never really change their spots. The deal would appear to have been between Yenn and Larraby. We've tape recordings—edited again—which would go a long way to proving that, and Bernard's 'disciples' will give evidence that they heard Bernard plotting it all with Larraby." He paused, and for the first time seemed to lose a little of his confidence, as if he could not understand the expression on Mannering's face. "Your reputation will be unsmirched. Bristow will make the charge and arrest the precious pair—Yenn deserves what he'll get, and Larraby's an old man and he'll soon die in jail, so you needn't have them on your conscience."

"Oh dear," interpolated Belle. "Has Mr. Mannering got one of those old fashioned things?"

Aristide went on as if he had not heard her.

"What could be more perfect?" he demanded. "The police will get a lot of favourable publicity, and so will you."

He leaned forward, and so did Belle, as if she were trying to will Mannering to agree.

He managed to make himself ask: "What happens if I refuse? What do you get out of it then?"

"I'd have to start all over again," sneered Aristide. "All of us, poor benighted victims of Bernard's hypnotism would be given a stern lecture by the judge, and then given psychiatric help at the public expense to rid us

of any lingering effects of Bernard's machine-made hypnosis. No one could ever prove we *hadn't* been hypnotised, Mannering. Even if we lose, we win in the long run. But we won't lose," he declared harshly. "You'll do what we tell you and so will Bristow. Don't try to bluff it out."

"No," Mannering said, as if very weary. "I won't try to bluff it out. You've done a beautiful job of this, Aristide, and there's only one more thing you have to do."

"What's that?" demanded Aristide, while Mannering could hear Belle, breathing almost hissingly through parted lips.

"Prove what you say," said Mannering.

"Prove *what*, exactly?"

"That some of the stolen jewels have been hidden here at Quinns."

"You doubt that?" Aristide cried, his eyes blazing. "If that's all the proof you want, come *on*. There are thirty-one different pieces of jewellery, six from each collection, with a bonus from Belle's father! Come on, we haven't much time!" He leaned forward to grab at Mannering's arm, but Mannering evaded him and stood up.

Whatever happened, he would forever blame himself. He had been suspicious of Aristide since this affair had begun, but he had not taken enough precautions. Deep down, he knew, he had not been able to believe that the young man would betray him.

"Mr. Mannering," Belle said in a tense voice, "don't try to be clever, will you? I would hate to have to shoot you."

He saw the automatic pistol which she took from her handbag and pointed at him.

They went out, into the shop, and Mannering saw Lar-

raby at one side, and wondered how the old man had managed to get in without being heard. Had he overheard what Aristide had in store for him?

Aristide did not appear to notice Larraby. He squeezed between an Elizabethan chiffonier and a Stuart settle, both oak, both beautifully carved, turned in front of the settle and lifted the seat.

"Remember this one?" he was saying with suppressed excitement. "You showed me the secret drawer, you showed me every hiding place in Quinns! It's a wonder you didn't hear me laughing as you went into such detail! How wonderful the craftsmanship was, what beauty had been hidden. You once told me about some love letters you found from some old woman who had never married. Beautiful, you called them—and you didn't even find a market."

He was breathing hard, now. So was Belle, but her pistol did not waver. But Mannering's rage grew so that it nearly boiled over.

It was five minutes to five, and there was little time left—short of a miracle, the police would charge him with having the stolen jewels in his possession within fifteen or twenty minutes. What he would have done had Belle not been standing so near with the gun, Mannering did not know. His whole body was taut and cold, and there was an icy clutch at his heart.

There was a click inside the settle, and a panel inside the carved seat slid open. Aristide snatched at it, then groped; then gasped; then straightened up and glared at Mannering with eyes which shone with madness.

"They're not here!" he cried. "You've taken them!"

. . .

But Mannering had not had the slightest suspicion that anything had been hidden there.

. . .

Out of the corner of his eye, Mannering saw Belle move, saw her consternation, saw the way she turned to Aristide, momentarily forgetting her gun and the man she was threatening. He moved forward and snatched the gun away. It was unbelievably easy. She did not seem to realise what had happened at first, she was so mesmerised by the stark horror in her husband's eyes.

"No," she gasped. "They must be there!"

Aristide's lips were parted, and his whole body seemed to shake. The glare in his eyes was murderous, but although he took a step forward it was not the gun in Mannering's hand which stopped him from attacking, it was the physical paralysis which shock had brought. He began to speak but the words would not come, only an incoherent mouthing, which might have been: *"You swine, you swine, you've taken them!"*

Lurching drunkenly round, he staggered towards a Georgian rosewood chest, and pulling open the top drawer, he groped inside; the scraping of his fingers on the wood could be heard like a mouse, scratching. Inside the drawer was a secret panel; at last it clicked open, and Aristide groped once again. After a while, he stopped. His body still quivered as he leaned against the chest, and when he turned round all hope had left him.

"Gone!" he croaked. "Gone!"

"Darling," Belle said in a choking voice; it was the first time Mannering had felt any warmth in her. "Oh darling, don't worry, don't worry." She reached and put her arms

about him, but he seemed unaware of her, only of the awful failure of his plans.

"You—took—them—!" he croaked. "Gone!"

Then Larraby came to Mannering's side, speaking softly so that the others could not hear.

"I put the jewels in his car, sir. It is parked just outside."

. . .

"*You* put them there?" Mannering felt almost dazed.

"I know I should have told you, sir, but you had so much on your mind, and I wasn't quite sure what was going on. I did notice that Smith was spending a lot of time polishing certain pieces of furniture, and he had never before shown such devotion to duty. So whenever he had finished with one, I checked and noted carefully what was there. I kept a close record of the times and occasions that Smith went to each piece, and felt quite sure that there would be no difficulty in establishing the truth, and to make doubly sure I twice took photographs, unsuspected by him, of him placing articles in the hiding-places."

Mannering was almost unable to speak.

"Josh, if I had known—"

"I know, sir, I should have told you. And yet—" Larraby's voice was so gentle in the shadowy room. "You might well have gone straight to the heart of the matter and I felt there was much more to be discovered." He looked sadly at Aristide, perhaps with a touch of contempt. "Shall we take these young people down to join the others? I think there is just time."

Taking Mannering's agreement for granted, he went

to Aristide Smith and Belle, took the girl's arm and said in the same gentle voice: "Come along, now. Come along."

They made no attempt to resist although they seemed oblivious of Mannering's closeness with the gun. Larraby pressed the control for the floor hatch and stood over the couple as they went down.

The hatch was sliding back again, cutting them off from sight, when a bell rang at the back door of Quinns, clear and sharp.

After a pause, Larraby said: "That will be Mr. Bristow and Bernard Yenn, sir."

"Yes," Mannering said. "Yes. We'd better let them in."

His heart swelled with gratitude to Larraby, but he had not really absorbed the full implications of it all yet, and still felt deep concern for Bristow, who was ending his career in pain and distress—even if there now seemed less fear of shame.

He opened the door and there was Bristow, not humbled or dismayed, but with a glint in his eyes and firmness in his manner, and his right hand tight about Bernard Yenn's left arm.

20

ARRESTS

"Ah, Mannering." Bristow was the man he had been ten, twenty years ago, brisk, assertive. The glint in his eyes even made him look far younger. "You know this man, don't you?"

"Yes, I—"

"Let me go," wheezed Bernard Yenn. "My God if you don't, I'll ruin you."

"Keep quiet." Bristow's hold was such that he was able to propel Yenn into the little hall. "It is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be written down and used as evidence." He looked icily at Yenn as he said to Mannering: "I have charged him with uttering threats and offering bribes to a police officer—to wit, me—in an attempt to cause a miscarriage of justice." Mannering could almost see Bristow's mind working; could understand how, at the last moment, Bristow had turned on his enemy and fought back. Now, he seemed to add: "Whatever happens I've done all I can."

Yenn, looking like a bigger edition of Aristide Smith, tried to control his quivering lips.

"I've told you, I've a tape-recording proving you—"

"That's enough," Bristow interrupted. And he gave a short bark of a laugh. "I've warned you that anything you say may be used as evidence."

"Bristow, you bloody fool!" screamed Yenn. "You'll end your career in jail, you—"

"Somehow I don't think so," Bristow said. He gave that bark of a laugh again. "John, I think I owe that change of heart half to you, and half to my wife. I'd almost forgotten what it was like to be believed in."

"Bristow—" began Yenn weakly. "There—there are some of my—my assistants here. *Here*. They're locked up somewhere in Quinns, they were brought here against their will and incarcerated. This—this man is responsible for that. If you arrest anybody you ought to arrest him."

Bristow looked levelly at Mannering, although there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"There's truth in it," Mannering admitted. "One of them is Aristide Smith, an employee, whom I have reason to believe is using Quinns to his own advantage—using me as a cover for his own crimes."

"Nonsense," bleated Bernard Yenn. "Utter nonsense. Lies!"

As he spoke, the door of Quinns was opened wider and two plainclothes policemen came in, including the tall, lean one who had been above the carpet shop the previous night. Behind them were several uniformed policemen and other plainclothes men. Obviously they had been outside for some time; they must have heard most of what had been said.

"Good afternoon, sir," this man said to Bristow.

"Hallo, Crabb," Bristow said almost perfunctorily. "Mr. Mannering, I don't know whether you know Chief Inspector Crabb."

"I don't believe we've met," murmured Mannering.

"Good afternoon, sir." Crabb nodded.

"What brought you?" Bristow asked, as if their arrival was a surprise.

"We had information to the effect that there were some stolen jewels here at Quinns, sir," said Crabb. "I—er—I have a search warrant, sir."

"Then use it," said Bristow, indifferently.

"Yes, go ahead," approved Mannering. "You won't find any stolen jewels but you will find some borrowed bodies, as it were, in my strong-room."

"Borrowed *bodies*, sir?" Crabb's voice rose.

"One of my assistants and some friends of his, involved in an ingenious scheme to use me at Quinns as a receiver of stolen goods," Mannering said. He shrugged. "Queer ideas people get. When you're ready to see them I'll take you down."

"How did they get in your strong room?" demanded Crabb, unbelievingly.

"I couldn't think of a safer place to keep them until everything had resolved itself," said Mannering. "I suspect that they may be able to tell you where to find the driver of the car which killed that young woman in Hart Row yesterday. And I know that they conspired to involve Quinns in illicit dealing."

"Will you charge them?" asked Bristow, intently.

"I'll be delighted to! And you might find some interesting evidence when you've searched them." Mannering smiled across at Crabb. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," Crabb said, and turned to Bristow. "Are you coming down, sir?"

"No. I've been in that strong-room often enough. Is there a car outside? I'd like to take Yenn in. I charged him with..."

"I heard you, sir," said Crabb. "There's a car whenever you want it."

Bristow nodded, glanced at Mannering with a gleam of

triumph in his eyes, then took a cowering Bernard Yenn out. In a few moments Mannering heard the roar of a car engine.

Larraby was on the telephone in the office, and Mannering was there in time to hear him say:

"Yes, Mrs. Mannering—I am quite sure he will be home soon. I thought you would like to know." He smiled gravely as he replaced the receiver and looked at Crabb. "Good afternoon, Inspector."

"So you two know each other," Mannering remarked.

"We have met, sir."

"Good. We're going to let our friends out from the strong-room," Mannering said. "I don't think we'll have much trouble with them." He pressed the controls of the sliding mechanism and the hatch opened. Crabb peered in, and saw the first wall-door slide open. He and two other plainclothes men stood at the top of the steps, and after a long pause the prisoners began to come out.

The young men, so spruce when they had gone in, were now unshaven and their clothes badly rumpled. The girls looked pale and heavy eyed. There was an air of incredulity among them all as they looked at the police.

The last to come out were Aristide Smith and Belle. Aristide had composed himself a little, and although he still looked in a state of shock, he said to Crabb:

"Who are you?"

"A police officer, sir."

"Well, it's time you arrested him." Aristide glowered at Mannering. "He kept me and my friends locked up—"

He broke off, as there was some kind of disturbance outside. A moment later a uniformed police officer came in, carrying a canvas bag which bulged as if it were half-filled with potatoes. In his other hand was a smaller,

wash-leather bag.

"We've found a lot of the stolen jewels," he stated simply. "They were in Aristide Smith's car, tucked in the boot. They even include some of the jewellery stolen from his father's collection."

Aristide sprang forward.

"It's lies—all lies! *He* put them there—" he pointed at Mannering. *"He—"*

"I think we'll sort this out at the Yard," said Crabb. "We'd better call for a van."

Ten minutes later, a Black Maria arrived and one by one the prisoners climbed into it. Some of the plain-clothes men made a perfunctory search of Quinns, but all of them seemed anxious to leave; as anxious to reassure Mannering that they had found nothing.

It was ten minutes to six when the door closed on them, and Mannering and Larraby were alone. They went upstairs to Larraby's flat; Larraby poured out two large whiskies while Mannering watched him almost unbelievingly.

"Josh," he said, "I think you're the most remarkable man I've ever known."

"Not even remotely as remarkable as you, sir," Larraby assured him. "You were quite prepared to face this out, weren't you? And quite prepared to take risks with your own future, for Mr. Bristow. All I have done I have learned from you, and you yourself did a similar switch of jewels, years and years ago." Larraby raised his glass. "Your *very* good health, sir."

He drank; and Mannering drank; and then he began to laugh. He had to exert great self control to stop himself from laughing, and it was largely because he recalled how Bernard Yenn had laughed so hysterically that he

finally checked himself.

"Josh," he said, "I was laughing at myself."

"Indeed, sir. Why?"

"Because it was only yesterday that I felt you were past this kind of exertion! Yet it was you on whom the whole affair turned." He chuckled again. "I do believe that if I'd have known what Aristide was up to I would have simply fired him, and he and his precious friends would still be plotting against parents and collectors. Josh, you'll outlive us all."

Larraby finished his drink and put his glass down.

"I hope I've a few more years, sir, but—" he hesitated—"well, now you've brought the matter up, I really don't think I should continue in the business." He smiled gently at Mannering's horrified exclamation. "Let me finish, sir, and I believe you will understand. I have had twenty very happy years with you, and I am now nearly eighty. Thanks to your generosity I can look back on my life without shame. Also thanks to you, I can afford to retire. I am sure it is time I did, sir, and I cannot think of a more appropriate occasion. I really cannot. I shall forever be able to look back on this as—may I use the phrase, sir?—as my day of triumph."

After a long pause, Mannering said quietly: "You're quite right, Josh. All this has been a day of triumph indeed. *Your* triumph. Let's talk about it tomorrow."

He stood up; and they shook hands.

. . .

"Oh dear," said Lorna. "It was inevitable I suppose, but it's hard to realise Josh won't be at Quinns. He's almost part of it." They had finished a light supper and

were sitting in the study, she on a pouffe with her head on Mannering's knees. "You'll never find a man half as trustworthy." Neither of them spoke for a while, and when at last she did, she changed the subject. "What a lovely picture you drew of Bill Bristow and his wife! It looks as if he'll have a thoroughly happy retirement, too. How old is he?"

"Sixty-ish," Mannering said, "but this afternoon he looked in his middle forties. He—"

Mannering went absolutely still, and the word 'he' seemed to hover about the room. The easy, lazy mood was broken. Lorna shifted her position to look round. There was not so much tension as concentration on Mannering's face. She did not question him, knowing at last that thoughts were racing through his mind.

"Lorna," he said at last.

"Yes, darling?"

"I've just had an idea."

"What is it?" she asked.

"We need someone to replace Josh. Someone wholly trustworthy, who will take risks, who is familiar with precious stones and *objets d'art*, whom we know, who—"

"*Bill Bristow!*" cried Lorna in a sudden trill of excitement. "Oh darling, do you think he would?"

"I think he might," Mannering said. "Darling, you really should have seen him this afternoon. He'd no idea what had happened at Quinns, as far as he knew he'd be facing a charge of accepting bribes before the day was out—and he was defying Yenn and the whole wide world. If he had to go down then he'd go down fighting." Mannering shifted his position and stretched out for the telephone, dialling Bristow's number. Lorna looked up at him, her chin on her hands, and the buzz of Bristow's

telephone bell echoed clearly back across the wire.

It stopped.

"Bristow," Bristow said.

"Bill," said Mannering, "you were magnificent this afternoon."

Bristow chuckled.

"I felt pretty good," he said. "And everything went off perfectly. Your Aristide Smith and his friends are all charged with robbery, and we've picked up the elusive Mr. James Smith—it seems he's Aristide's brother—and charged him with the murder of Miss Kitt. After running the girl down he panicked and left his car with Miss Devon—damned sharp of you to recognise that M.G., John. It's the one that Bruce Danizon used when he was watching my flat, by the way—just to make things even *more* confusing. Never mind, we seem to have got it all sorted out at last. And we'll get a lot more sorted out, too. Yenn swears he wasn't involved, but it's pretty obvious that both he and Aristide know a hell of a lot more than they say—and they'll admit it in the end. Yenn's already admitted that his tape-recording was a frame-up. Incidentally, two of the parents have now told us that they were blackmailed into silence because their own children were involved. It's nearly over, John."

"And you'll go out in a blaze of glory," Mannering observed.

"I suppose I will, in a way," agreed Bristow, and for the first time he sounded rueful. "I don't know that I'm going to like it, though. Neither my wife nor I really want to leave London, as I told you. We're used to it, and it suits us." When Mannering didn't answer, he went on: "I suppose I'll settle for a security officer's job in one of the big business corporations."

"Bill," Mannering said.

"Yes?"

"Josh Larraby is retiring."

There was a pause.

"Do you see what I mean?" asked Mannering.

"Do you mean—you're offering *me* the job?" Bristow's voice sounded shrill in unbelief.

"I'm wondering if you would take it," Mannering said.

"You mean—manager of Quinns?"

"Yes, Bill. Nothing would please me more."

There was another pause, and then Bristow's voice sounded, further away. He was saying: "He's -he's offering me the management of Quinns. I can't—I can't believe—" After a moment or two his voice grew louder. "John."

"Yes?"

"You—you wouldn't like to sleep on the offer?"

"No, Bill," Mannering said. "The job is yours if you'd like it."

"If I'd like it!" Bristow said, chokily. "It's—it's— John. John, I—er—I'd like to ring off. I'll call you back. I—er—I've got something in my throat. I won't—I won't be long."

Lorna looked anxiously at Mannering as he put down the receiver.

"Didn't he like the idea?"

"Oh, he liked it," Mannering said, smiling gently. "And he's going to take it," he said reassuringly. "He's ringing back, but—he's going to take it. Just at the moment he has a lump in his throat."

The first Gideon omnibus to appear in paperback, containing three full-length novels – GIDEON'S MARCH, GIDEON'S RIVER and GIDEON'S WRATH.

GIDEON'S LONDON

'Gideon has done more than any other character in fiction to maintain the reading public's faith in Scotland Yard.

The Observer

No other author since Dickens has done more to show London in all its many-sided aspects than John Creasey in his unique *Gideon* series.

The books are so much more than mere police procedurals. In each there are slices of London life presented so vividly and with such telling accuracy that those who know and love London will revel in them, and strangers to the city will find fascinating detail at every turn.

'A portrait emerges that is probably very much like that of a good police officer, the portrait of a man both tough and conscientious, not intellectual but extremely shrewd.'

The Sunday Times

The Baron Series

☐ 12813 5	The Baron in France	20p
☐ 15076 9	Salute for the Baron	25p
☐ 15077 7	Danger for the Baron	25p
☐ 15113 7	Nest Egg for the Baron	25p
☐ 16041 1	The Baron and the Missing Old Masters	25p
☐ 16042 X	The Baron Goes East	25p
☐ 16210 4	The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait	25p
☐ 16209 0	Frame the Baron	25p
☐ 16653 3	Gideon's London Omnibus	50p

All these books are available at your bookshop or newsagent or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below.

CORONET BOOKS, Cash Sales Department, Kernick Industrial Estate, Penryn, Cornwall.

Please send cheque or postal order, not money, and allow 7p per book (6p per copy on orders of five copies and over) to cover the cost of postage and packing in U.K., 7p per copy overseas.

Name .....

Address.....

.....

The treasures of centuries were on display at Quinns, but for John Larraby, the Baron's trusted confidant, it had been merely a normal day until Belle Danizon walked in

---

Her thwartening call to John Mannering – alias The Baron – was the opening move in a desperate attempt to intimidate him and involved the possibility of murder close to Quinns itself.

How could this possibly connect with a Yoga class packed with spoilt young people who were close friends of Belle Danizon ? Who was the man with the sinisterly soft laugh that was so disturbing ? And why was Superintendent Bristow so very frightened ? It was to take all The Baron's cunning to unravel the identity of his desperate enemy.

'The Baron's career is a crescendo of thrills
Daily M

CORONET BOOKS/HODDER PAPERBACKS L

UNITED KINGDOM
AUSTRALIA (recommended)
NEW ZEALAND
SOUTH AFRICA
CANADA

Fiction: Crime

ISBN 0 340 17315 7

95c

KQ-346-989